Summer of the Cicadas

BY

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THESIS

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For Viola and her daughters
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SUMMARY

*Summer of the Cicadas* [SOTC] is a project that I began ten years ago. I, like the Black American writers before me, have returned to the matrilineal metaphor to explore the compromised boundaries of identity. *SOTC* focuses on a young woman, Viola Moon, as she tries to come to terms with who she is in relation to both familial and cultural boundaries. Viola, Vi for short, believes that she and her mother, Cecilia, have the ability to share dreams. So when Cecilia is diagnosed with breast cancer and has a double mastectomy and the shared dreams end, Vi is thrown into a state of confusion. Vi becomes so obsessed with the physical amputation of Cecilia’s breast that she attempts to cut off her own breasts, resulting in a large keloid scar that resembles a question mark encircling her breast. The novel begins the summer after her attempted self-mutilation and subsequent stay in a facility for the mentally ill. She is released just in time to travel south and begin her tenure at a Historically Black University. Vi begins to re-dream her mother’s dreams once at A&M University. The dream’s insistent star, a starving baby girl, pushes Vi’s fragile identity into a greater state of confusion, making a transition into the tradition-laden A&M University impossible.
Lana had made such a fuss over the tub. She had wanted running water. She had not wanted the work of her childhood. As children, they had been forced to move the water from the well to the tub like mules. Only one bath every two weeks because of the trouble, and then sharing of the bath between all of them. Washing in the filth of others was worse than not washing at all. He had made sure that she had her tub, and that her children would know the luxury of both daily and singular baths. And they would not have to stew in the stink of others. Lana’s babies would wash alone.
CHAPTER 1

The air in Tallahassee didn’t move. The sensation was new, moving through the unmoving. Her arms and legs sliced through the thickness as she deplaned, following the passengers in rows one through twenty-two into the terminal. Her movements were conscious, as if her body was not the one she’d been using for the last 17 years. Not that control issues were new for her; in Chicago she’d had to fight to stay on her feet. Lake Michigan’s winds blew hardest on the south side, constantly circling around her, keeping her off balance. But in this place, she struggled to move forward. Vi wasn’t sure if this vertigo was better, but it was definitely different. Maybe different would be enough. A sea of bodies were moving her toward the baggage claim when she was paused by a rack of colorful postcards. Dolphins jumped off of the rack, while white sand beaches kissed gentle crystal blue waters. She hastily purchased one before falling back into line with the other recruits. She was left on her own to search for the suitcases marked as hers. Cecilia hadn’t been the only one to present her college-bound teen with the desert sand Adventurer four piece set from the Sears luggage department. Only the bright red ribbon tied around each piece marked the bags as belonging to Vi. She was struck by both Cecilia’s ingenious and her own impotency. She would never be able to move the two suitcases and footlocker beyond the airline’s area of confinement. Vi’s stillness seemed to attract the skycap.

“Just point them out, and I’ll load them up.” His smile was one of understanding.

Vi tried to smile back but could only push the corners of her mouth out enough to form the pout you make before you spit. “I think those are them. Ceci - My mother put red ribbons on them.”

“Your Momma must be a smart lady.” He smiled again.
Vi had never thought of Cecilia Before or After as smart or not smart. That would have been like evaluating the intelligence of her own arm or leg. Vi began to spit again in response, but decided to nod instead. Cecilia Before would have easily given her smile to the brown man in the blue uniform, but neither one of them was Cecilia Before. She followed her luggage out to the curb and into a cab in silence. The landscape sped by like one of those really bad movies where the green screen was too obvious because the actor in the forefront never quite integrated into the simulated landscape. She saw the chalky pumpkin-colored clay, and the skyrise-high evergreens, and the outstretched two-lane highway, but she wasn’t a part of it, and this background wasn’t fake. Was she the simulation? The thing to be integrated? Without advanced notice, the scenery outside the window stopped moving.

“This is it.”

The image was a memory of Chicago’s low-rise projects that could never bear the weight of names full of unfulfilled promises, like Jeffrey Manor, or Altgeld Gardens. These buildings seemed no different. Big black letters announced Tubman Towers, though it was a collection of four buildings, none of which was more than three stories high. Vi’s rememory was interrupted by the loud clearing of the driver’s throat. Cecilia After had warned her about scratchy throats, so she handed him a few crushed dollar bills from her pocket, and watched as he drove away. She stared at the things she’d carried from Chicago, sitting unnaturally on the crumbling concrete sidewalk surrounding Tubman’s Tower’s wilting courtyard. She perched herself on the edge of her footlocker and imagined leaving it on the sidewalk. Someone would come and take it, and then she wouldn’t have to worry about carrying it. She smiled then. It was the first she could remember in a long time. “You need help?” It was a boy. Not quite a boy, but not all the way a man.
“You need some help?” He said it louder like he thought she might have either been hard of hearing or stupid.

Was it human nature to always place the burden of understanding on the listener? “Yes.” It was as loud as his question.

He jumped.

She laughed. That was already different. That’s what Cecilia had told her After. That they both were different.

The boy/man loudly followed her up to the 2nd floor. 203D. Tubman’s Tower’s promise ended at the dorm room door. The letters were brightly painted in white from one of those templates that marked institutions; institutions that didn’t hide from themselves. The rooms at the Centre had not had numbers. They were bold-faced lies. “Suites” christened Magnolia and Gardenia, as if they were growing something lovely and regenerative. Vi pushed against the door, and it resisted. Vi hoped, against her rule on hoping, that those institutionalized template numbers were a lie. She finally fit the key into the hole and turned. The door opened, and she was met with the dank smell of trapped air mixed with what some guy in a factory in Ohio thought lilies smelled like. This was no lie. She had broken her rule in vain. The room number had completely fulfilled its promise. At least one side of it did. She turned, but the boy/man was gone. When did he leave? Did she imagine him? But her trunk was in the center of the doorway as proof of her present sanity. Dr. Gabrielle’s voice floated like a warning buoy bobbing on the surface of her doubt.

— The real and the imagined aren’t the same, and you must learn to decipher the two.

— And if I can’t?

— You will.
— But if I choose not to. Then what?

— Then you can’t go home. Is that what you want to hear from me?

As if Dr. Gabrielle had ever said anything to her that she had wanted to hear. Vi began to unpack her side of the room. She knew her side, because the other side was already full of Danielle. She knew her name was Danielle because it was glued to the wall in large pastel letters. Pictures covered every square inch of the wall above Danielle’s bed. Danielle walking the dog. Danielle riding a bike. Danielle at prom. Danielle at a football game. Danielle at church on Sunday. Danielle asleep. Danielle awake. It was as if the universe had conspired to record every aspect of Danielle’s life. There was Danielle with older versions of herself and younger versions of herself. Danielle’s relations were never ending.

Even after Vi had finish unpacking her things the room was still disturbingly unbalanced, as if it would tip over from the sheer weight of Danielle’s abundance and Vi’s lack thereof. She pulled a small wallet sized picture from her purse. It was of her, Cecilia, and her father. She couldn’t have been more than five or six. The edges were folded in on themselves, and the color was fading. His face was a brown blur. She couldn’t remember a time when she had been able to distinguish his nose from his lips; his cheek bones from his sideburns. She caught a reflection of herself in Danielle’s mirror. This was her memory. Her body. She would often search Cecilia for the differences between them in an attempt to find her father. Her legs were longer than Cecilia’s, so she had gotten them from him, and though Cecilia could claim most of her face, Vi’s eyes were definitely not her own. When she was eight, she had begun to answer any uncomfortable inquiries about her paternity in the same way. I have my father’s eyes. So since the time she was eight, she had seen through his eyes. Was skewed vision her legacy? Dr. Gabrielle had been obsessed with legacy.
— I have my father’s eyes.

— Tell me about him.

— Why?

— My mother is my father.

— I’m sure she has had to do double duty, but you talk about him so-

— So what?

— So definitively.

— When was the last time you talked to him?

— I have no conscious memory of ever talking to him.

— What has your mother told you about him?

— That he was there and then he wasn’t.

— Is that all?

— Isn’t that enough? It was enough for me.

— Was?

— What?

— You said was enough. Past tense.

— Is it still enough?

— Vi?

— He didn’t just leave me nothing. He loved me. I know because he gave me his sight.
— His sight?

— His eyes. He could have given me his nose, his lips. But instead I got his eyes. That means something doesn’t it? It does. His sight was his gift to me.

— Gift? Like a legacy?

— He didn’t leave me alone with nothing.

— He didn’t leave you alone. He left you with Cecilia.

— I know. But I don’t remember him. I need to at least remember him. It’s so lonely to not even have a memory. That’s why he gave me his sight. In a way it’s better than a memory.

—

— Isn’t it?

— Is it?

The question mark around her heart began to throb. She pinned the small picture to the middle of the piece of cork over her desk and stepped back. A vast nothing surrounded the speck of her on the bulletin board. A rush of warm air up the back of her neck pushed Vi to turn toward the door.

The air was followed by a rush of a girl.

“Roomie!” She cut through the thickness in the room as if surrounded by a force field of perkiness and threw her arms around Vi. “It’s so good to meet you. My parents have just kept me running, and I haven’t had a chance to come to campus and hang out like I’ve wanted to. Thank God this is their last night here. I’m putting them on a plane tomorrow back to Detroit. Good riddance cause if I have to play the obedient loving daughter one more day, I think I’m going to bust. Viola right? What have you been up to? You got in today right? Who have you met? What have you seen? Any cute guys?”
“Vi.”

“What?”

“I prefer to be called Vi. Hard V, long I.”

“Oh. That’s cute. Viola does sound kind of down homey.” Danielle’s mouth and eyes never stopped moving. “Are your parents at the hotel?”

The space that Danielle had cut through the air dissolved. Vi grabbed her running shoes from her bag and began to put them on.

Danielle looked up from snuggling one of the hundreds of pink puffs of fur that littered her bed. “Going running?”

“Why do you say that?” Vi pulled the laces tighter.

“I just noticed you putting on running shoes.”

“These? Just habit I guess. I do run though. Sometimes.” Vi grabbed the postcard from her purse. “Right now I need to go mail this.” Vi held up the postcard in an effort to substantiate her story.

Danielle grabbed a piece of paper from her purse. “The post office is a little hike. You want me to go with?”

The wind this girl brought with her reminded Vi of home. It pushed her off balance. “No.” The urgency of Vi’s no was unable to penetrate Danielle’s force field. She jumped off of her bed and skipped to her desk, and handed her a folded piece of paper. “Okay. Here. Take my map.”

Vi grabbed the map and got out of the room as quickly as she could. She descended Tubman Tower D toward the center of campus alone. The map Danielle had given her suggested that the post office would be in this direction. Vi didn’t trust maps. When she was eight, the map Cecilia had hung on her bedroom wall had moved Egypt out of Africa. It had taken months to convince
Cecilia that Egypt was indeed in Africa. Since Cecilia refused to go back to the DuSable museum where Vi had learned the truth on a class trip, the only proof she could provide were other maps. Vi had been obsessed. She had scoured every set of encyclopedias in the school library. It wasn’t until the 1976 edition that Britannica had gotten it right, but her school didn’t allow the encyclopedias to leave the library.

“What makes that one more right than the one on your wall. Why can’t you let Egypt be? What difference does it make on 84th and Lankton Avenue?”

Vi had had no answer for Cecilia. She hadn’t known what difference it would make. She was only 8.

Vi turned right at Lincoln’s Hall, and left at Booker T’s Fountains. The unchristened post office was just where the map had suggested it would be. The even less assuming mailbox stood out in front like a sentry. She addressed the postcard but stalled on how to fill in the white space behind the palm trees and jumping dolphins. There were no palm trees and jumping dolphins in this place. Only dusty red brick buildings and dustier hills littered with people and cars. The cars were loud, and the people were everywhere. She couldn’t write that, could she? So instead she wrote: Dear Cecilia, I made it safely. Will call soon. Your daughter, Viola Ikwewe Moon. Vi slipped it into the mailbox. She wasn’t sure why she’d written her full name and relation, as if Cecilia would have erased her fully from her memory in a mere five hours. She wished she had the card back to say something smarter or funny to show Cecilia how she’d already begun to change. Vi opened the lip of the mailbox and looked in.

“That only go one way.” By the time the words had reached her, the sayer had disappeared through the post office doors, and words were disconnected from a body.
When Vi returned to Tubman, the only sign of the life-sized Danielle was a note pinned to her corkboard. Vi read the first few lines. Staying at the hotel with my parents. See you tomorrow. Vi readied for bed. Her appointment with the work study director was at 10am. If she missed it, she would have to go back. To what? Cecilia Before was gone. There was nothing left to return to. She couldn’t go back. It wasn’t safe there. Cecilia needed her to stay here, at school, away. She found the pill bottle in the bottom of her purse. It was empty. She had flushed them back in Chicago. Had decided that Florida would be different. Had decided that her obsessions would not follow her across state lines. So Vi lay back, closed her eyes, and willed herself to sleep.

Giggles flowed easily from her lips into her cupped hand. The grass felt damp and warm against the bottom of Vi’s feet. She was running so fast across the backyard that her feet began to slip.

His hand shot out to steady her. “Be careful baby.”

Vi turned and smiled. His eyes were big and she could see them shining even though it was still dark out. The shiny part started to overflow onto his brown cheeks. “I’m okay daddy. I’m a big girl.”

“Well, does a big girl need me to push her on the swings?” He looked at her as if he was trying to focus in the predawn light.

Vi put one hand on her not quite a hip. “Come on Daddy. It ain’t no fun if you don’t push.”

With that they both raced toward the swings that he had bought her for her seventh birthday. Mother said it had taken him all night to put it together.

Maybe that’s why she wasn’t surprised when he woke her up while the sun was still sleep and asked if she wanted to go play. And maybe that’s why she wasn’t surprised when he placed his pointing finger across his full lips in the internationally known “let’s not wake mother”
signal. That’s why she happily jumped out of her bed, tiptoed down the stairs, and ran out the side door.

The moistness of the new morning seemed to go with the wetness smushing between her toes and the dampness on her daddy’s cheeks. She sat down as her daddy held on to the bottom of the swing. He pulled her back and up until her toes were dangling in front of his face. Her stomach became a C as she inhaled, waiting. Then he let her go. She tried to catch the joy in her throat, knowing that they had to be quiet, that they couldn’t wake mother, but it spilled out anyway. Over and over he pushed. Just when it seemed she couldn’t get any higher, she saw the sun peeking over the roof of the house. She looked down to tell daddy he could stop pushing but he wasn’t behind her. He was leaning against the shiny chain link fence watching her, like his eyes had yet to adjust to the dusty gray light. Vi couldn’t believe that she was swinging so high by herself. She wanted to yell down to her daddy to make sure he saw her. But she didn’t have to scream because his eyes told her he knew.

When he carried her back into her room and tucked her into bed, she couldn’t remember ever being so happy. The next day she thought it had all been a dream, until she pulled back the covers and saw the proof stuck between her toes.

Then Mother appeared in the door of her room. Her eyes were red and dry. Her voice even when she told her.

Vi didn’t believe her. Couldn’t believe her.

“Daddy ain’t gone. Look.”

Vi waved her dirty little feet in the air. Sure that Mother could not argue with the now dry blades of grass that proved her daddy would never leave her. But Cecilia simply walked away.
Vi sat up in the bed. The unfamiliar smallness of her dorm room quickly became familiar. It was different. This was a dream she had never shared with Cecilia. This was different. A new memory? The need for her father seemed larger here in the After. She inhaled, attempting to close the widening gap inside of her. Maybe the next dream would bring her closer to closing it. Maybe this place was ripping her open to clean the wound and heal it. Maybe. She closed her eyes, tempted to break her rule on hoping just one more time. This time, hopefully, it would not be in vain.

When Vi opened her eyes and stretched the next morning, she felt more rested than she had in months. She had seen his face, even if it was blurred now. It was more than she had done before. The digital clock blinked a red 12:00 back at her. There was a silence echoing through the building that felt both familiar and alarming all at once. She grabbed her watch. It was 10:15. Vi snatched down the first thing in her closest and yanked it over her head. The dress was one Cecilia had given her. A hand me down. But Vi had been attracted to its greenness. It reminded her of spring in Chicago, mostly the spring before this summer. Vi turned away from the mirror and shook the memory from her head. She had dreamed, but it wasn’t the Dream. This was her new beginning, and she couldn’t be late.

Vi busted into Adam Clayton Powell’s Administration Center like a prom queen at a dirt bike rally. The rest of the appointees had obviously not received the memo on how to dress for success. She was it, a little blade of overdressed grass in a sea of cool casualness.

“Where she going? Prom?” Bodiless voices peppered her walk to the front desk. Giggles fluttered around the lobby as Vi made her way to the receptionist.

“I’m Viola Moon. I have a 10 ‘o’ clock appointment with Dr. Crisabel.”
The receptionist looked at the clock. “You mean you had a 10 o’clock.”

“I’m sorry I overslept. My alarm clock wasn’t set correctly.”

The receptionist had obviously lost interest. Her head dropped back toward the document in her hand. “Have a seat.”

Vi did as she was told. She watched as every other able-bodied, financially-lacking, alarm clock operating work-study candidate filed into the office. It was after four when the receptionist motioned Vi to follow her. Dr. Crisabel reminded Vi of the women she’d seen on the cover of Ebony and Jet; women who took charge of their men, their families, and their communities with frozen smiles and equally frozen hair. Vi smiled. Vi and Cecilia used to make fun of those women, inventing lives full of chaos behind the images. Photos of Dr. Crisabel with lines of women who looked just her, lined the back of her desk. There was something about sisterhood written across one of the frames. Vi smiled again, hoping to encourage some sort of empathy. The glare she received in return over Dr. Crisabel’s designer frames suggested that her sisterhood was not given so easily.

“Ms. Moon, my 10 o’clock. It’s 4pm. Why are you just darkening my doorstep?”

“My alarm clock didn’t go off.”

“Do those things usually set themselves?”

She reminded Vi of Cecilia, in the way that hard things remind you of soft ones. “No ma’am.”

“Then why are you just sitting in front of me at 4pm.”

“I didn’t set my alarm clock.” Vi placed one hand in the other and wished she was one of those magical beings that could sprout wings and fly away.
“That’s right Ms. Moon. Personal responsibility. You are at University now. And if you plan to stay here, than you must learn personal responsibility. You parents have done their work. Now it’s time for you to stand on your own two feet. Do you understand?”

“Yes Dr. Crisabel. I understand. I’m on my own.” She was on her own, but it was the first time Vi had said it out loud.

“Good. Now let’s get about the business of putting you to work. Since you are the last student on my list, unfortunately the only job assignment left is in the Attic.”

“The Attic?”

“The library’s warehouse.”

“I like the library.”

“Not the library dear, the warehouse. Don’t worry. You’ll learn the difference soon enough.”

Dr. Cristabel wrote something on a form as her lips formed a smile that never reached her eyes.

“Take this to Dr. Locke in CAC001. He’ll get you started.”

It was still as hot as it had been at 10am. Darkened circles of sweat had formed in the armpits of her green dress. Vi checked the map Danielle had given her the day before. She could find no Attic or Library Warehouse, so she went to Woodson Library and asked anyone behind a desk until she finally found one who had worked there for more than 4 hours. The woman was fortified behind a desk stacked high with overstuffed manila folders.

“Excuse me. Do you work here?”

“Last time I checked.” There was a sticky sweetness in her voice

“I was sent over from Work Study to the Attic. Can you direct me there?”

“Of course dear. The Attic is right underneath you.” The woman opened a manila folder.

“Are you sure?”
The folder closed, and the sticky sweetness fell away. “Did you ask for me to know or to guess?”

Vi physically stepped back. “To know.”

As quickly as it fell, it returned. “Go on pass the reference section, behind the non-circulating library. There’s a door marked for employees only. Take those stairs down as far as they go. Knock hard cause Locke is a little hard of hearing.”

“Thank you.” But the words were lost on the woman, who was back focused on her folders.

Vi followed the instructions. She passed by the reference section and passed by the non-circulating library. Still she almost missed the door. Vi saw it only because she was always looking for things that weren’t there. The Crispus Attucks Collection. The door led to a stairway. She had gone down two flights before reaching the bottom. A plaque that should have sat at the foot of the White house adorned the double steel doors. The Crispus Attuck’s Collection curated by Dr. Euripedes Locke, PhD. The cavernous room was bathed in light. Books were stacked to the 30 ft ceilings on white shelving. The concrete walls and floors had all been painted a pristine white. An infinitely repeating clicking sound overwhelmed the space, having nothing soft to rest against. The source, a dot matrix printer behind the only desk in the room, seemed to be printing in all corners of the warehouse. Her approach was unacknowledged by the room’s sole inhabitant, until she was almost face to face with him.

He looked up without expression. “Welcome to the CAC, Miss?” He reached out to her over his desk.

Vi began to give him her hand, but hesitated at the sight of the deep burgundy stains covering all of his fingers.
“Excuse the stains. I regret that it is unavoidable circumstance of my employ. Permanent marker.” Red markers littered the otherwise pristine area around his desk.

“I’m sorry. Moon. But you can call me Vi.” She forced her hand into his. He was an average man. There was nothing notable about his outward appearance. His hair was a bit unkempt, but the look could have come more from the length than lack effort.

“You must have done something to someone Ms. Moon to get placed up here.” He did not look at here directly. It was as if he was focusing just to the right of her eyes.

“Up here?”

“Up here in the Attic.”

“But I had to come down three flights of stairs to get here. This isn’t even the basement. It’s the sub basement.”

His unfocused eyes pointed toward the large notebook that lay open on his desk. “Perception is fluid Ms. Moon. Perception is fluid.” He closed his book and looked in her direction.

“Mr. Locke when would you like me to start.”

“Doctor.”

“Pardon me.”

“It is Doctor Locke, Ms. Moon. “

“I’m sorry. Doctor Locke.”

“It’s the details Ms. Moon. You will find I am a very particular man, and I enjoy the particularity of those in the employ of the University, and thus under my supervision by directive of the University.”

Vi nodded.
“Your duties will be a subset of mine. Primarily I am responsible for text reclassification, moving circulating books to.” He waved his arm in reference to the hundreds of shelves stacked high with books. “to non-circulating. You will primarily be responsible for the physical movement of the texts form the library up to the Attic. We will of course work around your schedule. Do you have it?”

“I haven’t registered yet.”

“Please drop off a copy of your registration by next week, and I will let you know your required hours.” He turned back toward the printer.

“Of course.” Vi could not get out of the Attic fast enough. The air was so much thinner there that she would have anticipated that to be a relief, but it was not. The stairs seemed narrower on the way up than they had on the way down.

Vi was overwhelmed. All she wanted to do was click her heels three times and return home to fall asleep in Cecilia Before’s arms. But Chicago was a thousand miles away, and Cecilia Before was a life-altering surgery away. There was no going back. So a close second was to allow herself to be swallowed up by the melancholy of her side of Tubman’s Tower 203D. Of course that was not to be because Danielle had obvious been charging her force field of perkiness in Vi’s absence and was determined to push Vi back into the thickness.

“Come on Roomie. Change. I’m starving.”

Vi had no strength to fight this girl. So she changed and allowed her tiny roommate to push her back into the thickness of campus.

“Have you been to the cafeteria yet? Most of the food is a little gamey. But if you stick to the omelets you should be okay. Blackjack makes a killer omelet, and they serve them all day.”
“I don’t eat eggs.”

“Come again.” Danielle twisted her head around as if it wasn’t fully attached to her neck.

“I don’t eat eggs. I never have. The first time Cecilia tried to make me eat them I threw up all over the breakfast table. It was the first and last time eggs were served at my house.”

“That’s disgusting. Who’s Cecilia?”

“My mother.”

Danielle raised her eyebrows. “You call your mother by her first name?”

Vi nodded.

Danielle seemed to shrug off her surprise with the same ease she’d shrugged off Vi’s convocation shame. “Don’t worry. No eggs, no problem. We’ll find you something to eat that even Cecilia would approve of.”

In between Danielle’s intake of breath and her inevitable next word, Vi pointed toward a large crowd of students standing outside of the overnamed Grand Ballroom. “What’s that line for?”

“Johnny come-too-lates who were fool enough not to pre-register.”

Vi stopped walking.

Danielle looked at Vi with wide eyes. “Please tell me you pre-registered.” Shaking her head, Danielle grabbed Vi by the arm and pulled her in the direction of the long line. “What would you do without me?” She ushered Vi threw the crowd as if she owned the place.

The ballroom had been transformed into a temporary bureaucracy. Tables and bodies took up every square inch of space. Hastily written signs marked the departments. ENGLISH, MATH, SCIENCE silently announced the classes that could be shopped. Danielle was like a woodpecker,
and Vi’s ear was the oak tree. She wouldn’t stop talking or couldn’t stop. Vi wasn’t sure which was true.

“Girl, I don’t know why you didn’t pre-register. All the good classes are closed now. You’re going to be taking classes everyday at 8am. I hope you get up early. I don’t start until 10am on Monday, Wednesdays, and Friday, and I only have one class at 11 on Tuesday and Thursdays. You really should have pre-registered.”

The words were so busy spilling from Danielle’s mouth that she didn’t notice Vi swing off to the right and stop at the English desk. The only class left was 8am on MWF. She took it. Then she went to the Math desk. The only Calculus class left was 8am on TR. She took that one too. Vi was able to get into a Spanish class that was held at a reasonable time, and just had one History elective left to find.

Vi stood in front of the history desk and watched the boy sitting at the desk as he read a crumpled paperback. “Do you work here?”

He rolled his eyes to the top of his head and exhaled loudly. He placed his book open and face down onto the table.

Vi scanned the class listings on the desk. “I’d like to register for 101 at 10 on MWF.”

“That’s closed.” He patted the back of his book.

“How about the one at 12pm?”

“Closed.” He patted again.

“How about the one at 2?”

“Closed.” Each time he responded, he added another syllable to the word closed.

Vi felt like turning and running out of the place, but knew if she started running she’d have nowhere to stop. “Why don’t you make it easier on both of us and tell me what’s open.”
He pointed a cotton candy pink covered fingernail at the only class without a black thick line drawn through it. Sociology 113: Historical and contextual study of the formation of the modern African American familial structures at two on MWF.

“Are you kidding me? I don’t even know what that means.”

Danielle appeared at her shoulder. “Maybe that’s why you should take it. Get you some real book learning. Do you smell that? It’s starting to stink in here. Sign her up.”

Book boy filled out her registration card and handed it back to Danielle.

“See. Done. Let’s go.” They turned and headed out of the ballroom. Danielle looked back over her shoulder and waved at book boy. “I think that guy at the history table was checking me out?”

Vi twirled the gray blue cord around her fingers. The seven was fading. She was glad that she didn’t have to use it. The phone rang on the other end. It was deep and shrill all at once. Vi waited and wondered where Cecilia was at the moment. The voice that picked up was so very far away as if the call had drug her out of something from somewhere.

— Cecilia?
— Viola?
—
—
—
— I’m fine.
— You’re fine?
— It’s hot.
— Hot.
— Is it hot there?
— Sometimes.
—
—
— Cecilia?
— It’s so quiet here now.
— Sound is everywhere here.
— Sound?
— I mean it’s the opposite of quiet.
— I understand.
—
— School?
—
— Viola?
— I’m here. I got lost for a minute. I’m back. School is
— Good?
—
— Hard?
—
— Fun?
— Yes.
— All of that?
— All of that.
— You?
— Fine Cecilia.
— Dr. Gabrielle phoned. She sends her best.
— Who?
— Dr. Gabrielle sends her best.
— I can’t hear you. The connection must be
— Bad?
— Yes. Bad.
— Okay. Call me again.
— I will.

Vi looked at the phone, wanting to place her lips against the receiver before she placed it back on the plastic cradle. But the sighing girl behind her in the phone line had hard eyes, and Vi could feel them in the back of her head. Vi didn’t need anymore holes in her head. Vi could not afford another leakage, so she hung up without a goodbye kiss. Dr. Gabrielle sends her best.
There was no room for Dr. Gabrielle in her head or in this place. She was better here, dreaming new memories, and the need to slice away the future was gone.
CHAPTER 2

Sound woke her. Cecilia went to the window searching for the source of the vibrations reverberating inside of her head. It was dawn, and the chorus grew stronger, but the source remained regulated to her memory. Cicadas. This spring would be their time. Their 17th year. Vi’s 17th year. Cecilia laid back down and closed her eyes. She wanted to forget and remember. She listened as her second chance child’s soft footsteps grew louder. Cecilia could feel Vi’s warm breath on her face, but she did not open her eyes. She needed to forget and to open her eyes would mean she would be face to face with memory.

Vi shook her gently. “Cecilia, what’s that noise? It woke me.”

“Cicadas.” Cecilia spoke from the in between of sleep and wakefulness. “Last time they came right before you were mine.”

Vi laid down facing Cecilia on the bed, resting her head on Cecilia’s breast the way she had done since right after her birth. She adjusted her head. “What’s this?”

“What?”

“This.” She placed her hand on a hard spot where her head had just been.

“When you reach a certain age, new lumps appear in new places everyday.”

Vi’s eyebrows moved toward each other in the way that they had since right after her birth.

“Don’t worry. I have an appointment for next week.” She patted the offending spot, and Vi readjusted. Cecilia’s heart seemed to beat for both of them.

They slept, and Cecilia remembered in both sound and soundlessness.
The dull hum had woke her then. She had not remembered falling asleep. He was at her feet. Memory opened her eyes. He was rubbing her feet. Cecilia remembered liking it. She hadn’t wanted him to stop. He had looked up at her, and his eyes had reflected her need. The first cicada had landed on his head. She’d shooed it away with a lazy wave, but the heavy-bodied insect had lifted only to descend an inch away from its previous location. She’d shooed again. This time with more determination. The bug, now assured of her impotency, had not even bothered to flap its wings. It’d walked away from her hand casually. It stopped right at the edge of his nose. He hadn’t even twitched. It was as if he didn’t see. His hands had remained on her feet, massaging both of them as if he’d neither felt or saw or heard the encroaching bug.

“Your face. That thing is your face.” She had gotten more disturbed. She was not sure if it was his inaction or ineffectiveness that had pushed her growing anxiety to the surface.

“It’s harmless.” He had continued to concentrate on the soles of her feet as if nothing else existed. As if the world outside of him did not exist.

“But it.” Cecilia had not been able to ignore the bug that had planted itself right at the corner of his mouth.

He hadn’t moved. “Don’t worry baby. I got you.”

“I know you do, but.” Cecilia had not been able to feel her heart beat.

“Let it be. Let me worry about that.”

She’d picked up the magazine that she was pretending to read and knocked the cicada off of him. But it was only replaced by another and then another. In what had seemed like seconds, they were both covered with them. She’d wanted to scream, but she was afraid they would get into her mouth and cover the child that she was carrying; her second chance child; her
redemption. The lilies across her chest had grown dark with her mother’s milk. Then there had been nothing. Whiteness and light and silence had covered them both.

That’s all that they ever dreamed/remembered because that was all that remained in Cecilia’s memory. When she had awakened from the white silence, the cicadas were gone, and Vi was in her arms alive, and the man at her feet was at her side. The recurring nightmare that she’d had for as long as she could remember had not been an omen. Her child was alive. And the dream had never returned and now they would soon celebrate the 17th year of her life. Cecilia could feel the heat emanating from Vi’s skin. The cicada’s hum had given way to the cardinal’s cacophony and the sounds of the street. Cecilia detached herself from her now sleeping child and kneeled on the floor next to the bed, watching Vi’s rhythmic inhalations before gently shaking her and helping her back to her bed.
CHAPTER 3

Vi was having trouble hearing. It was as if someone was gradually siphoning language and leaving only sounds, clinking and clanking against each other. It was a game of concentration that she had not yet perfected. She struggled to match the sign to the signified. She was in sociology and the professor was talking about Ghana. He was discussing a symbol. A bird. A sankofa. Then meaning separated and became only sound. At first she thought he was singing. Maybe an African song. But the rest of the class was scribbling wildly, and Vi wondered how they were able to record his discordant notes. What was left absent meaning? She searched in her bag for her microcassette recorder; something to somehow record what was transpiring, but her backpack was empty.

“What boom boom familial boom baht Akan?” The question came at her like a bomb being dropped on Beirut, expected, but still disturbing. He scanned his attendance sheet.

“Ms….Moon.”

Was he speaking another language? “Pardon me?”

“baht baht, Ms. Moon. Boom boom families boom bat?”

It was like bongos beating in her head. She wasn’t sure if she should dance or sing.

“What do we know about any familial structure? They’re all like raindrops.” The voice came from behind her. It was clarity. The first sign that had found signification in days.

“Raindrops?” The professor’s attention was now fully focused on the voice behind her.

“Unique. Different. Resistant to reduction.”

The professor smiled. His teeth lit up both his faces. Should he have two? No one else in the room did. Was her sight beginning to be compromised as well?
“But, to use your analogy, raindrops collectively make water, what can we say collectively about the Akan?”

“The Akan are more logical about the familial lines. Children belong to the mother. Unlike in the West where everything; property, name, ancestry follow the male line, the Akan traditionally follow the female line.”

“How is that more logical?” A nodding boy twisted his head toward the voice.

“Paternity is always in question, while maternity is always unquestionable.”

“Haven’t you ever watched Maury?” A girl from the corner of the room piped in.

The room erupted in laughter.

“But men are stronger. Right?” The nodding boy looked toward the professor for help.

“Survival of the fittest. Right?”

“Actually genetic fitness is also the arena of the woman as well. She chooses who to procreate with. Through her choice she decides how strong or weak her offspring will be. She also is in charge of what comes out of her body. The decision to end a pregnancy lay with the woman. She decides what children get born and by whom. Your survival is dependent on your mother, not your father.” The voice behind her was like a clear bell ringing over the din of misunderstanding.

The professor went back to writing on the board and talking from the book and signification disappeared. Vi moved further down into her seat, hoping that her smallness would somehow translate to invisibility and deafness and muteness. She wanted to disappear from sound, from hearing and not understanding.

“Hey do you know what you’re doing your paper on?” It was the voice of her saviour. It came from somewhere behind her. Like yesterday and the day before; like her sanity.

“Diaspora?” It rolled off her tongue disconnected from her consciousness.
“Diaspora? What about it?” It was still behind, so far behind that it began to fade. It faded into something too far for her intention to reach. Vi turned, struggling to match a mouth to the sounds she could no longer pair with coherent meaning.

It appeared, and he was girl pretty. His face was thin, framed by perfectly groomed locks.

“Poorchild.” Clarity. The voice floated into the foreground.

“What?” The sounds took form again, and she understood.

He pushed past the retro afro that was attached to a beige boy that had separated them.

“Tyrone you see me trying to get pass you. You just gone sit there and look more stupid than you really are.” He held out his left hand. “I’m Ronnie.”

“Hi Ronnie. I’m Vi.”

“No, you’re Poorchild, but don’t worry cause I’m here now. Oh shush, Dr. DotheRightThing is giving us the eye. We’ll conversate after class.”

Vi had to assume that as long as he was doing the talking that Ronnie didn’t consider that conversating because he continued to talk through the rest of the class. It was wonderful. There was no grating of incongruent symbols against each other. Ronnie talked, and Vi walked through his words as if they were her childhood backyard. It turned out Ronnie was a gossip; the kind of gossip that gossipers told their deepest secrets and ultimate shames too. By the end of class Vi knew no more about the family unit in 17th century Ghana than when she’d sat down, but she did know about the three way affair going on between the two line sisters in the third row and the brother with the fade sitting in the back of the room. Ronnie told her about the chubby girl two seats over with the fingernails eaten down to the white meat, who was anorexic; and the irritatingly attentive kleptomaniac in the front row. The depth of his insight into the interior lives
of others amazed and amused her. At the end of class she didn’t want him to stop talking. She
didn’t want the cacophonic music of non-language to reconsume her.

“Have you started your paper?”

“Paper? I haven’t even gotten the books yet.”

“But it’s due next week.” Ronnie grabbed her by the hand. “To the bookstore, and I’m not
taking no from you.”

Vi followed Ronnie into the bookstore and into the History section. He picked up several
books and placed them into her bookbag. “These are the required books for the class.”

Vi watched as if in a daze, wondering why no one was stopping him, including herself.

“Knowledge should be free. Fuck the Gatekeepers. Doing everything they can to keep us out
and them in.” Ronnie walked out of the bookstore and Vi followed him, expecting some sort of
alarm to go off as she passed into the thick heat of the afternoon, but there was nothing.
Obviously the bookstore believed in the promise of their students.

Vi could barely catch her breath. She crumpled onto the first bench she could find. Ronnie
just stood watching her and smiling. “What’s so funny? That was wrong.”

“Wrong? Poorchild, please. Apartheid is wrong. Jim Crow is wrong. Don’t ask don’t tell is
wrong. That— that was your first revolutionary act.”

Vi didn’t feel like a revolutionary. She felt like a thief, but she smiled.

He sat down next to her. He was quiet.

Vi needed him not to stop talking. “What’s your paper on?”

“Fags”

“What?”
“You heard me. I’m writing about Ancient African fags. All these DotheRightThing Black Power Intellectuals want to pretend that homosexuality is some kind of white American sickness crap. If there were beautiful black men in Africa, there were other beautiful black men loving them. And that’s what I’m writing about.”

“Are you…?”

“I resist labels. I’m nothing and everything. As yet my love for God and myself have kept me from imbibing in fornication of any kind.”

Vi thought that she must have been hearing wrong again.

“Why are you looking at me like that? Yes. I believe in God. My God loves what he made. That doesn’t mean my church isn’t filled with self-hating hypocrites. What does that have to do with me? When I do fall in love, I’m not going to let a bunch of pseudo-intellectual, self-hating, closeted homosexuals decide what that person will look like.”

“Is there anything you don’t have figured out?”

Ronnie smiled but it was more like Vi’s spitting smile, than a genuine one. “Have you ever been in love?”

“With a boy?”

“A boy, a girl, whatever floats your boat. Well, have you? You can’t just leave me hanging. I have told you all of my little business.”

“You’ve told me everyone else’s business. The only thing you’ve told me about your business is that you don’t have any.”

“Poorchild listens. I like. Well I promise when I get some, you’ll be the first one I tell. Now spill it, or I’m going to leave you buried in this pile of diasporic confusion.”

“No, not that I can remember.”
“Not that you can remember? Poor child who forgets love?”

Can’t love be forgotten? Like yesterday. Like Cecilia Before. Like a father from pictures. Like unclaimed dreams. “Isn’t it possible to forget?”

“You know, that may be. You could have blocked it out. In my psych class, I read about a man who couldn’t remember anything before his 25th birthday.”

Right. I blocked it out. That would be like blocking out the birth of your second chance child.

“May be.”

Vi walked to Tubman Towers alone weighed down by both the textbooks in her backpack and her lost and rediscovered memories. Safely tucked into 203D, she could only stare at the books Ronnie had made her steal in the name of intellectual accessibility. Fuck the Gatekeepers he had said. Fuck the Gatekeepers she had repeated. Do something on patriarchy he had said.

Patriarchy? She had repeated, but I don’t have a father. Everyone has a father. She had offered only silence. Do you have a mother he had asked. Of course she had said. Well do your paper on matriarchy. Matriarchy? she had asked. Yes. He had turned to a chapter in a book she had just stolen and pointed. Matriarchy. She stared at his finger. He countered her inaction with action. Take these. Vi pulled the two pills out of her pocket. Just take one he had said. They will help you focus he had said. She put them on top of her desk. Pills were only temporary. They could not fix her. The question marked around her heart began to itch. The smell of death seeped from between the covers of the books. She closed her eyes and recalled living words. The words she recalled were not new ones, if there was such a thing. They were used, but at least decipherable.

From their beginning Dr. Gabrielle had loved twisting them in on themselves, squeezing the unobvious out of nothing into something; first to stop the severing and then to sever Vi from Cecilia.
— Viola please relax.

— I can’t. I’m not from here.

— What do you mean?

— These things. They belong to you. I can’t relax in someone else’s space.

— Can you sit?

— Of course Doctor Gabrielle. I’m not a moron. What kind of last name is Gabrielle?

— That’s actually my first name.

— Are you from Alabama?

— No. Why do you ask?

— My people are from Alabama and they do that?

— Do what?

— Use first names like last names. Seems like a lie to me. So which are you in here?

— Which am I?

— Either you’re Doctor or Gabrielle.

—

— This room is too small for you to be both.

— I never thought of it that way. You choose.

—

— I choose Doctor.

— Okay Viola, why are you

— Vi. I prefer to be called Vi.

— Okay Vi, why are you here?
— I don’t know. My real doctor referred me.

— Well. Why do you think she referred you to me?

— I don’t know. I couldn’t read her writing on the referral.

— What did you go into see your doctor about the day she referred you to me?

— I don’t remember.

— I really need you to try. Were you not feeling well?

— I found a lump.

— Where did you find it?

— Under my arm.

— So you went to the doctor to get a diagnosis?

— No.

— Well why did you go?

— I went so she could cut them off.

— Cut what off? The lump.

— My breasts.

—

— You don’t really need them, you know. They are just there. In the way.

— You want to cut off your breasts because they are in the way?

— Yes. You don’t really need them.

— What about the lump? Did you have it tested?

— Yes. And it turned out to be of an underachiever.
— That was a joke Doctor. You’re supposed to laugh when someone tells a joke. It’s only polite. Are you allowed to laugh?

— Of course I’m allowed to laugh. So is your joke a way of telling me that the lump was benign. Not cancerous.

— I know what benign means. I’m not a moron.

— I’m sorry if I made you feel that way.

— I didn’t say I felt like a moron.

— You do know that you really don’t need breasts?

— Why do you think we have them if we don’t need them?

— I hate question marks.

The question mark that cradled her heart began to throb. She caressed the keloid through the thin cotton of her t-shirt. Dr. Gabrielle could put at least one down in the win column. She had stopped Vi from doing the obvious, from severing the life force that had separated Cecilia into two parts of herself; Before and After. But had the need really stopped or had the words confessing to it just stopped? It was the words that made the need real for Dr. Gabrielle, because Vi’s need had moved beyond sign and signification. The need had existed in a place that didn’t need language. But Vi had to separate today from yesterday; the imagined from the real. Vi placed the pills into her desk and picked up one of the books that Ronnie had stuffed into bag and began to read. It was her second act as a revolutionary.

“Hurry up.” Danielle snatched the pillow from Vi’s face.
“I’m not going.” Vi wondered if Danielle shared her hearing problem. “I have a paper due next week. I haven’t even started it.”

“Next week? You’ve got the entire weekend to write that thing. Now hurry up.” Danielle disappeared from the doorway, and Vi placed the pillow back over her head. Ten minutes later Danielle was back in front of her.

“I’m giving you exactly five minutes, and then I’m leaving you.”

“Danielle, I’m not —”

“You have four minutes left. The Gamma Nus aren’t going to wait all night.”

“I’m not going.” Vi rolled over, facing the wall.

“Their line is supposed to be there.” She sang it, as if she was one of the sirens, enticing a lost sailor to his death. “They’re like men servants. Juju said he’d make them do whatever I wanted them to.”

“That sounds terrible.” Vi had enough trouble exercising control over herself.

“What’s terrible? A man slave. I’ve been waiting all my life or one of those.” She checked her lip-gloss in the mirror on the back of the door. “You have three minutes.”

Vi pulled Cecilia’s quilt over her head, wishing Danielle away like a bad dream.

“Juju isn’t supposed to tell me, but he said that the guys on this line are so weak. He said he made one of them cry over the silliest things, and this guy is supposed to be a legacy.”

Vi moved aside the worn embroidered hearts of the quilt. “A what?”

“You know. He’s a legacy. His father was a Gamma Nu and his father was a Gamma Nu and his father was a Gamma Nu.

Vi stopped listening. A person could be a legacy? A whole body, not just pieces; not just lips or ears or eyes.
Danielle continued to prattle. “Cause Ju is self-made, so he has this thing about legacies. Anyway Ju is like he’s not going to let anyone sneak into his frat. No matter how many Gamma Nus he has in his bloodline.”

A legacy. A person could be a legacy. “Okay. I’ll go.”

A big triumphant smile spread across Daniele’s face. “Good, cause your five minutes were up anyway.”

The house was smaller than Vi thought it would be. In all the movies she’d seen, frat houses were always antebellum mansions with manicured lawns that directly opposed the debauchery that was always spilling from inside. This was a regular house. Even less than regular. A small white frame bungalow that couldn’t have had more than four bedrooms. Kids were milling about outside like they would at any house party. Vi exhaled. This she could do.

Danielle must have felt the tenseness dissipate. She turned toward Vi and smiled. “See it’s not so scary, is it?”

Vi decided it was too early to respond. They hadn’t even made it inside yet. Crimson bulbs glowed throughout what would have been the living room and dining room if there had been furniture left in the rooms to define them. Both rooms were packed with gyrating bodies. The music and bodies moved with one pulse. The tall thin-faced boy Danielle referred to as Juju popped out of the crowd and pulled Danielle’s pseudo-resisting frame into the melay.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be right back.” Danielle disappeared into the throbbing thicket.

Vi looked around the room, unsure of how to proceed. Though the windows were open, the hot air hovered undisturbed. Vi wiped her palm against her forehead.

“There’s punch in the kitchen.” A girl with a cool glass waved at her.
Vi moved toward the punch. The small kitchen was not as packed as the rest of the house, and the majority of the people crowded into it were together. Vi knew this because they were all dressed in the same black jumpsuit and combat boots. They stood in a semicircle around the table with the punch. One of the boys stood directly behind the bowl with a ladle held in mid-air in one hand and a plastic yellow cup in the other. His eyes were trained on the liquid in the bowl.

“Can I have a drink please?”

It was as if the call began in the depths of hell. Each jump-suited figure began to echo her request in a deep resonating cadence while surrounding her. Vi could see the smiling faces of others outside of the circle, but they couldn’t drown out the stern faces of the boys that now stood as a living prison to her. Vi willed herself not to run. It was college. Fraternities were steeped in history. Fraternities were steeped in secret ritual. As the chant ended, and the boys all dropped their jumpsuits to their ankles in a staccato-syncopated rhythm, Vi realized that fraternities were also steeped in humiliation. The boy with the cup and the ladle filled it and handed it to her without ever looking at her. Vi’s hand shook as she accepted it. She poured the overly-sweet purple liquid down her throat and was amazed at how quickly her hands stopped shaking. She placed her hand over her heart. She could no longer feel the pounding. Before she could connect one to the other, all of the jump-suited flashers ran out of the kitchen just as Danielle was running in.

“Girl I’ve been looking for you everywhere. The slugs are up. Juju says this is going to be the best part.” Danielle’s eyes rested on the empty yellow cup in Vi’s hand. “Shit you haven’t been in that blue juice have you. They told us all about it at orientation. How many cups did you have?”

Vi held up one no longer shaking finger.
“You should be okay. Just stay close to me.” Danielle dragged Vi through the now empty house, out the front door, elbowing and pushing her way through the pulsating crowd that had now formed a circle on the front lawn. The jump-suited flashers were at the center of the circle. There were in a line shackled together at the ankle. Danielle’s Juju stood outside of the line chanting undecipherable instructions to the boys, and the line began to dance in unison. But Vi felt him, before she could clearly see him. He was familiar, or maybe just his pain was familiar. He was in the middle of the line. Almost indistinguishable from the others. Shaved heads in dark jumpsuits. There was something about his cadence; his repetition of the well-practiced steps; the perfectly calculated lift of his shackled leg that rested familiar inside of Vi’s chest, even though he almost kept perfect rhythm with his line brothers his apartness was obvious to her. He was a fragment, and Vi felt his fragmentation as clearly as she lived her own. Vi had seen fake chains before, and these were not. She could see where the shackles were cutting into his ankles. Pink raw skin was beginning to appear in the exposed flesh between his boot and jumpsuit leg. She watched his face. A wince climbed up from his chains through his thighs across his chest and settled in his lips. Vi watched the shackle rub against the tender meat of his shin, and he faltered, so she bent down and took up the slack on his chains. It was as if the circle of spectators inhaled at once as one unit. His eyes did not leave the back of the bald head in line in front of him. The redistributed weight of the chains threw off his equilibrium even further. He misstepped, and Vi dropped the chain. It was too late. All the boys followed him to the ground struggling to stand up and get back into position. Danielle took a step back. Vi could not read the look on her face. It was a copy of all of the faces surrounding her.
Danielle’s Juju parted from the clump and walked up to the boy who Vi had attempted to help. “Are you kidding me? You think you gone sneak into my frat on some bloodlines. Your father carried it, and his father carried it, and his father carried it, but that don’t mean you will.”

Vi had known without knowing that this boy was the legacy. He was a part of many.

Other members of the fraternity in various interpretations of Juju separated from the crowd and pushed her away from the line. They began to scream into the ears of the fallen boys. A weak link breaks the chain. A weak link breaks the chain. A weak link breaks the chain. It all began to converge in her stomach and climb back up the way it had come down. She heaved once and blue juice spewed at Juju’s feet.

“Danielle get this drunk bitch out of here. She almost threw up on my Jordans.”

Danielle shot a look at Juju, and her lips parted, but no sound came out. Instead she turned toward Vi. “Come on Vi.” Danielle hesitated before grabbing Vi’s hand and leading her away from both the crowd and the house. After a few minutes of walking in silence, Danielle sat down on a curb. “Why did you do that?”

“I don’t know what was in that stuff, and the heat and the people. I told you I didn’t want to go. It was all too much for me. Before I knew it, it was coming up as fast as it went down.”

“Not the throwing up part. Why did you grab the chain?”

Vi didn’t have an answer. How could she explain about the boy? About how he was a piece like she was a piece?

“What’s wrong with you?” Danielle stared at Vi as if she was seeing her for the first time.

“You can’t interfere with the line. Who does that? Who breaks the chain?”

“But the chain didn’t break.”
“It’s a metaphor Vi.” She rolled her eyes to the top of head. “Is this your first time around black people?”

Vi didn’t know how to answer the question. Wasn’t she black people?

“Do you not know how serious this is? We take our Greeks serious.”

“I’ve seen it on television and—”

“No that’s white greeks.”

“Are there any other kind?”


Vi’s impotence stood on her shoulders. She tried to shrug out from under the weight, but Danielle misread the gesture for apathy.

“I give up. I’m trying to teach you about yourself. I’m trying to teach you how to be here. This is a historically black university.”

“I told you I didn’t want to come, but you wouldn’t hear me.”

Danielle threw up her hands and began walking away.

She had seen that before. Dr. Gabrielle. Exasperating. Dr. Gabrielle would say. Then it had made Vi smile. She felt as if she’d won when she was rewarded with Dr. Gabrielle’s back. Now watching Danielle’s narrow back move away from the curb, Vi followed her back to Tubman, feeling as if she’d lost.

While Danielle undressed and went to bed, the silence made it harder for Vi to fall asleep. She couldn’t stop thinking of the boy with the forefathers. She couldn’t stop seeing the skin under the skin that had been rubbed away by the chain around his ankle. She couldn’t stop remembering
the look in his eyes when she had lifted the chain. By the time she fell asleep, the sun had already begin to peek out over the evergreens at the edge of campus.

Light woke her. Recent familiarity with the dimness of Tubman Towers 203D made the brightness an unfamiliar alarm. Vi’s eyes opened to a place she’d never been. The walls were a soft chartreuse, Cecilia’s favorite. The room was sparse, but comfortable. Her body rose easy, completely satiated by sleep. The late morning sun followed her soft footsteps into the nursery. The stillness hanging over the crib did not alarm her. Vi held the baby in her arms and placed the child to her breast without thinking. The suckling child sighed with relief as the milk flowed from Vi’s breast, but soon the milk began to overflow from the sides of the child’s mouth. Vi removed her breast from the child’s mouth, but it was too late. The soft streams of milk quickly became a torrent washing Vi off of her feet and the child out of her arms. The baby opened her mouth in protest, screaming from an unsatiated hunger, even though they were both floating in excess. The child disappeared under the torrent of milk flowing form nowhere and everywhere. Vi was paralyzed. So she waited. She waited and watched. It could have been seconds or hours before the truth of the child’s fate descended on her. Vi waited for something to rise up in her, but it didn’t. A scream started behind her navel, but would go no further. Even after the floating body of the child became visible, the knot remained unexpressed.

The honking of the alarm woke her the second time. Was this the true awakening or the nightmare? This time she was greeted by the sunless familiarity of her dorm room, and the unfamiliar silence of her roommate’s uninterrupted anger. Yes. She remembered. She had broken the chain. Vi had never thought that she would miss the sound of Danielle’s continuous chattering, but she did. Especially now that the images of the night before had been crowded out by the dead baby with her father’s eyes. That dream did not belong to her. It was Cecilia’s. Vi
was not sure how she knew, but she had never been surer of anything in her life. Why was she having Cecilia’s dream? And who was the baby? Was she a dream/memory like Vi’s birth? Did that child come first? Is that why Cecilia had had nick-named Vi her second chance child? Vi followed Danielle. Her thoughts were too caught up with the dream to think for herself. When Danielle brushed her teeth, Vi brushed her teeth. When Danielle grabbed her backpack, Vi packed her backpack. When Danielle left Tubman’s Tower to go to breakfast, Vi walked behind her, keeping pace with the pit pat of Danielle’s flip-flops made against her smooth heels. But the pit pat pit pat only moved the child and the sound of her futile sucking to the edges. But soon the sounds of the whispers and not so whispering denunciations of the people they passed pushed the baby’s noises further. She had been outed. She was not the first to throw up at the frat house this semester, but she was the first to interfere with the line. She was now and forever the breaker of the chain. Vi arrived in the cafeteria to both looks of amusement and disgust. In the crush of students, there was no room for drowned babies, and Danielle had managed to disappear. Vi was moved toward the least populated space in the food line. She found herself face to face with Blackjack and the omelet station.

“What you need?”

Blackjack was half white. Not in the sense of racially-diverse parentage, but vitiligo had made him into a living symbol of America’s melting pot. The white side of him seemed to be melting over his blackness, erasing it a little at a time. First an eye, then a nose. His mouth was still untouched, but the white sat right at the edge of where his lips met, waiting.

“What you getting in your omelet sweetheart?”

She wanted nothing. She wanted to sleep without dreams. She wanted to not be different.

“What Nothing.”
He moved the spatulas as if they were Picasso’s brushes. Stirring and caressing the gelatinous mess into something uniform and stagnant. Without Danielle’s bob in front of her, Vi had to choose her own space. Danielle had made the transition easy. Always leading her. She’d led her across campus, to the cafeteria, through the food line, into the Dining room and to a perfectly situated table that she had christened “their” table instantly. Now alone, Vi was unsure. Once Blackjack the melting pot had placed her stagnant plain perfectly reformed eggs on her plate, she stood at the door to the dining hall. Danielle was at “their” table, but it was clear from the rigid straightness of her back that Vi was unwelcome. Vi moved through the sparsely populated dining room until she reached an unoccupied corner table. With her back to the rest of her silent accusers, she began to eat the omelet. The first bite surprised her. It was the best thing she’d ever tasted. One more aspect of herself that she was a complete stranger to. As she shoveled the three egg plain omelet into her mouth, she imagined all of the opportunities she’d missed, with quiche, eggs benedict, eggs sunny side up. Her hunger surprised her. The empty plate on the table was neither sign or signification of her satisfaction. The memory of the violent unsatiated suckling rang in her ears. The paralysis eased and the stuck thing from the dream/memory broke free. Her hand was too slow and too singular to stymie the resolute betrayal of her digestive tract. Blackjack’s work of art had returned to it’s gelatinous roots and was now, ironically, really akin to Picasso’s pieces as it splattered across the table. Vi sat covered in what she had always known she would not be able to swallow, unable to decipher the caustic sounds that were traveling through the dining hall. A hand, once unfamiliar, appeared on her shoulder, while its well-manicured partner wiped her face from behind.

“If this is going to become a habit, you are going to have to buy me some rubber gloves.”
Vi could only manage to push her lips in the direction of a smile, as Danielle pulled her up from her chair back from the table and guided her to the bathroom and away from the accusatory cacophony of the dining hall’s non-language.

With Danielle’s help, Vi had just enough time to return to Tubman to change and make it to the Attic at her scheduled time. Cecilia’s dream/memory baby would have to wait. When she reentered the space, it seemed larger and sparser, but Dr. Locke remained unchanged. The constant printing had not stopped. He was sitting in the same position at the same desk that he had been the first day. It was as if he had never gone home for spaghetti and meatballs, a hot shower, and then to bed with the light of Conan illuminating from an unwatched television; just to wake up the next day, and do it all over again. He looked as if he had cut out the middle of life’s monotony, choosing instead to stick to the center.

Dr. Locke looked up, but his eyes still did not meet hers. “Ms. Moon. Welcome back to the Attic. I hope you are ready to work.” He closed the large black ledger that he had closed the first day she had walked into the Attic. “Do you have any experience with the Library of Congress?”

“I’ve been in libraries my whole life.” Vi remembered the first time. Or was it the second time. Her memory of Cecilia was clear, but her father was a blur.

“This is not the Dewey Decimal System of your local public library Ms. Moon. This is a University. The Library of Congress is vastly different.”

Vi knew that it was all just letters and numbers, and since she’d been reading since she was three, she doubted she would have a problem. His eyes shifted to meet hers and for a moment she thought he was anticipating her thoughts. “I’m sure I can figure it out Dr. Locke.”

“Ms. Johnson, please show Ms. Moon what she needs to know.”
Out of the vast sparseness a girl appeared. Vi wasn’t sure if the girl had always been standing there and she’d just been too focused on Dr. Locke to notice, or if she had just entered the warehouse. Either way she was there now, standing in front of her. Vi stood waiting for further instruction, but Dr. Locke was back to muttering to himself as he reopened the giant ledger and checked the pages that had not stopped printing from the antiquated printer. He handed a stack of papers to Ms. Johnson without looking up. Ms. Johnson nodded in the direction of an empty push cart, and Vi followed her out of the warehouse and into the service elevator. In the elevator, the girl handed Vi a map of the library.

Vi waited for the girl to show some recognition of either her digestive betrayal or betrayal of the chain. “Thanks Ms. Johnson.” There was no response. Maybe the whole campus didn’t share one brain.

“Stop tripping. My name is Tunisia. Yours?” Tunisia had a way of pausing before she spoke, as if she was reading a script.

“Vi.”

“Okay Vi. This is a pretty sweet gig. Dr. Locke is a strange bug, but he pretty much leaves you alone if you don’t ask too many questions. He hates questions. You from Chicago?” She turned toward Vi in a way that looked practiced.

Vi looked around for a hidden audience. She saw no one and wondered who this girl was performing for. “How’d you know?”

She gave Vi another practiced side-glance. “I figured you was from somewhere up North. I was gone say Detroit next.”

Vi followed Tunisia’s practiced steps out of the freight elevator onto the fourth floor as the girl continued her assessment.
“I don’t know. It’s just the southern is missing. I’m all the way down south, Hotlanta.” She pointed toward the number four next to the elevator. “I like to start at the top and work my way down.” Tunisia pulled out the print out and moved her head to the left and then the right as she performed reading it. “Looks like we’re headed to World History first. We pull books in two categories; temp and perm. Temp go to the attic, and the perm go to the incinerator.”

The tubes of fluorescent light flickered in History. The constant on and off was disconcerting to Vi. It’s unevenness reminded her of a place that she’d been but didn’t want to return to. “We destroy books?”

“We don’t. The engineers do. We just mark them as permanent pulls.”

The books on most of the shelves looked as if they had remained undisturbed for years. Their apparent isolation and ultimate destruction saddened Vi. She ran her hand across each book’s spine as she passed. E. Moon. She stopped. E. Moon, She pulled it. E. Moon. She had seen it before. E. Moon. It had been scribbled across something. It was something that had belonged to Cecilia. The envelope was robin’s egg blue. It had stood out from the white envelopes and brightly colored sales circulars. E moon scribbled in the top corner. There had been more between the E and the Moon, but it had appeared as indistinguishable scribble in her prepubescent mind, and now was unrecoverable. Funny how things were triggered. How memories were reawakened like tulips every spring, but not always as pretty or perfectly formed. Cecilia had taken the envelope and disappeared into her robin egg’s blue bedroom. It was the last time Vi had seen the envelope. Vi placed the book on the cart.

Tunisia turned as if stung by a crazed soldier bee. “That ain’t on either list.”

“What?”
“Nothing goes on this cart without it being on the list. Locke will lose it.” She placed her hands on her hips, and eyed Vi suspiciously.

“I’m not pulling it for storage. It’s for me.”

“Maybe you need to get your own cart. Cause don’t nothing go on my cart that’s not on the list.”

Vi picked up her recovered memory from the cart, and turned to return to the Attic for her own cart when a low grunting interrupted her.

Tunisia’s eyes lit up as she placed a finger to her lips. The sternness on her face had been replaced with a conspiratorial wink.

Vi put the book back on the cart and followed Tunisia. “Where are we going?” The girl didn’t respond, so Vi continued to follow her. The air was hot and the smell of sweat and funk was strong. Heavy grunts interrupted the South Pacific’s silence.

Tunisia pointed to shadows feeding on themselves in the corner.

“Are they?”

“I come up here and watch sometimes. You’ll be surprised what people do when they think nobody watching. It’s some nasty ass girls up on this campus, and you can’t never tell how nasty they are just by looking at them.”

There were no faces, just dark outlines pushing against each other.

Tunisia slammed the Anthropological Genetics in Melanesia on the floor, and the pushing shadows froze. “Smell like ass and fritos up in here. This library need to invest in some air freshener.” The shadows scattered, and a hard laugh fueled with self-righteousness rose from Tunisia.

Vi’s Judasian digestive tract contracted.
Tunisia didn’t notice her discomfort. She reentered her one-woman show behind the cart undeterred. “You got someone special?”

Vi couldn’t get the pushing shadows or Tunisia’s mean laughter out of her head. Those shadows were feasting on each other. “No.” A cramp nearly bent her over.

Tunisia did not acknowledge Vi’s pain or divert from her script. “Well if you ever get somebody, don’t bring him up in here. Unless you want the whole campus to know your business.”

Vi recovered E. Moon from Tunisia’s cart. “How about you give me the other half? I think I got it.” She needed to get away from this girl, the shadows, and the smell.

Tunisia clutched the sheets to her chest. It was the first non-deliberate action she’d demonstrated since they’d met. Recovering quickly, she handed Vi more than half of the print out. “Suit yourself, but you still gone have to go back up to the Attic to get your own cart.”

Vi was lucky enough to find an abandoned cart in the Fijis. By the close of her shift, she was halfway through the remains of the 2nd floor archaeology section when he appeared like a perfectly preserved Woolly mammoth in the mountains of Montana. She studied the back of his head. It was the boy who had struggled with chain; the one with too many fathers to count. Vi moved closer. He didn’t notice. He was writing something onto a yellow legal pad as if his life depended on recording every word the moment it came into his consciousness. Vi stepped closer, moving the pushcart aside. Cambridge’s Archaeology of South Africa toppled from the edge of a shelf, and the boy’s shoulders stiffened. He gathered his pad and pencil without looking at her. She wanted to ask him about his leg and his line. Her mouth opened, but before she could call out to the boy who couldn’t carry his chains a familiar breeze cut through the middle of the space.
“Poorchild. Poorchild.”

Vi turned to see Ronnie moving toward her at the speed of light.

“I’ve been crawling through this museum of dead ideas for a half an hour looking for you.”

“Heard you went all in at the GNus’s. Who knew I had created such a monster. You ain’t playing with this revolutionary stuff. I wish I was witness to the unveiling of all of those misogynistic Neanderthals.”

“It wasn’t like that. It was …” Her eyes found the spot the boy had occupied. He was gone. The boy with the chafing chains had disappeared like Cecilia Before, but in his place he had left no After, just emptiness.

By the time she returned to Tubman, Vi was mentally exhausted. She headed straight for the not a princess phone, and dialed the familiar numbers and heard the now familiar voice of Cecilia After. There was a time when she thought Cecilia After would never be familiar to her. But she was, and her familiarity was comforting.

— I had a dream last night.

—

— Cecilia?

— Yes?

—

— Was it a sweet one? You should only share the sweet one’s. Vi?

— Yes?

— Tell me about it.

— I dreamed about Daddy. It was my birthday. He gave me a swingset.
— He did? He did. I remember.
— What happened to it?
— We moved. After. We couldn’t take it with us.
— Oh. I remember.
— Dr. Gabrielle called again. She said she still hadn’t heard from you.
—
— Will you call Dr. Gabrielle?
— Yes.
— Promise.
— I promise.

Vi placed the not a princess phone back into its cradle and went back to her room. Cecilia After only wanted to hear the good dreams. She had no room in her After for drowning babies, even if they did belong to her. Vi had been looking forward to Danielle’s noise clutter to drown out the silences between her and her mother, but not only were her sounds absent, so was she. On the other side of the room was the emptiness that Vi felt inside. All of the Danielles that had peppered the other side of 203D were gone. She was not surprised. She did not blame Danielle for leaving. The question mark around her heart began to throb. She was crazy. She had been institutionalized. She had broken the chain and decorated the dining hall with Blackjack’s Picasso. She dreamed about babies that did not exist. Would Lonnie’s pills help? To take them meant that she was sick. That the dream was only a dream. That the child was something to be forgotten. Her hand rested on the book on her desk. It was from the library, the history section. She didn’t remember checking it out. E. Moon. Enough had been forgotten. Vi laid down on her bed, cradling E Moon. Elaine Moon. It was not her father. Of course it was not. Untold Tales.
These were Elaine Moon’s Untold Tales, not E unknowable in between Moon’s. But weren’t they all the same?

— Dr. Gabrielle, don’t you ever get tired of this?

— Of what?

— This. The questions. The answers. Don’t they run into an ocean of sameness?

—

— Yes?

— Honestly? No.

—

— Everyone has a unique story even if the facts are identical. Each person’s truth is different.

— Same facts, different truth?

— It’s my job to help them find their truth. So when it starts running into an ocean of sameness, I’ll have stopped doing my job.

— Cecilia and I share our truth, or we did Before.

— But you are two separate people. How do you think that’s possible?

— She’s my mother.

— What about your father?

— What about him?

— Why don’t you share that same connection with your father? Don’t you share his blood?

— I shared more than Cecilia’s blood. We shared the same body. Her heart beat for me. My father didn’t do that.

— Do you mean your father couldn’t do that?
Couldn’t or wouldn’t didn’t matter. He didn’t. He didn’t, and now he was unrecoverable. She opened Untold Tales and began to read. It was midnight by the time she finished reading. Her paper was due tomorrow. She would have to pretend to not be crazy later. She still had the two pills left, but she would not submit to alteration. She would not force. She would not write about Ronnie’s stolen matriarchy. She would write about Elaine Moon and her Untold stories; her oral histories. She knew that this woman was not her father, but tonight she was the closest thing she had to him. The clocked flickered 3:30 by the time she’d printed the paper, and collapsed into a sleep absent dreams.
CHAPTER 4

The warmth coming through the window woke her. Her body rose easy, completely satiated by sleep. The late morning sun followed her soft footsteps into the nursery. The stillness hanging over the crib did not alarm Cecilia. She reached for the child the way she had a hundred times before. Cecilia held the baby in her arms like she had done before. The child found the fullness of her breast easily. The girlchild’s eyes never left Cecilia’s face, attempting to find a familiar and solid resting place. The suckling child sighed with satiation as Cecilia’s milk flowed into her empty tummy. She sucked long after she was full. She sucked until Cecilia’s milk began to backup into her tiny throat and seep out of her puckered lips. Cecilia attempted, like she had always done, to remove her breast from the child’s mouth, but the child’s hunger was too great. The milk made soft streams down the child’s cheeks, puddling in her little ears. But those soft streams soon changed into milky geisers shooting out of the sides of the child’s mouth. Soon the soft walls of the room were being erased by had been erased with the rising milky substance flowing from Cecilia’s, now flaccid, breasts. They were both floating in it. The child, now a distance away from Cecilia, was suckling on nothing. The loud noise of the baby’s angry lips smacking together on nothing echoed through the room. Once the child disappeared completely in the translucent liquid, Cecilia waited for panic to rise up from her belly, but it didn’t. The scream stuck in her throat as she searched for the child. When she finally saw her, Cecilia thought even like that, she was beautiful. Perfect. But the scream was now blocking Cecilia’s breath, and the absence of oxygen made her head spin. She swallowed hard and heard something escape from her lips, but the voice wasn’t hers, and the sound wasn’t hers, and this dead drowned child was not hers. A familiar voice called out again, and Cecilia was able to place
it. It was Vi, her second chance child. The one that had stopped this nightmare. She was on the other side of this dream, and Cecilia only needed to open her real eyes to see her.

Cecilia opened her eyes to a water gray room. Bubbling paint erupted from the ceiling where water had memorialized its path of infiltration across the room and down the wall.

Her hovering second chance called out her name. “Cecilia. Cecilia.”

Cecilia pretended to look through her.

“It’s me your daughter.”

Cecilia could hear the tears in Vi’s voice. She twitched her nose first. She watched through barely open eyes as her child’s breath stop for a moment. “Smells like death in here.” A slow smile spread across Cecilia’s face.

“Stop playing dead. That’s not funny and you aren’t dying.” Vi’s face was a mixture of laughter and panic.

Cecilia held out her hand as an olive branch.

Vi hesitated but took it.

“Who said me? I’m talking about her?” Cecilia nodded toward her roommate on the other side of the gray curtain.

The woman had been dying for days, at least that was what she announced at least ten times a day. If her resolve to live was half as strong as her resolve to die, she would have been cured by now.

Cecilia squeezed Vi’s hand. “Biopsy back?”

Vi’s eyes found the clouded window pane. She did not squeeze back.

Now Cecilia understood. The returned dream was a warning. It made her decision clear: “Did you tell him he can take them?”
Vi’s eyes abandoned the window and focused on Cecilia. “Then what will be left?”

“All of me.” But Cecilia could not erase the drowned dream child from her thoughts. She struggled to keep the defeat she felt out of her voice.

Vi shook her head like she used to when she was three. “No.”

“The rest of me. The best parts of me.”

“Won’t you miss them?”

“Not as much as I would miss you?”

Vi shook her head in disagreement. “Dead people don’t miss.”

“Of course they do. You don’t need them”

“Why do you have them if you don’t need them?” She released Cecilia’s hand.

“Decoration.” Cecilia laughed, but her laughter hung in the air unreturned.

“Children need them.”

This time Cecilia shook her in disagreement. “No. Babies need them.” Cecilia hoped that without them the drowning child would go away. Her child, her real child, was here in front of her. The one in her dreams was only a warning that her breasts would mean the end of both of them. “Not children. Not sixteen year olds.” The words came hard, like long-reserved tears. “We don’t need them anymore. You’re big enough to feed yourself.”

Vi’s exterior began to crumble. Tears crept down her face. “I’m sorry. You’re right. We don’t need them.” She crawled into the Cecilia’s small hospital bed, and laid her head on Cecilia’s chest carefully to avoid the place where they had cut away only the first of much more.

Cecilia hid the pain that emanated from Vi’s careful contact with her bandage. She’d heard the uncertainty in Vi’s voice, so she took her child into her arms, and pushed the dream child out of her mind. Removing her breasts was the only choice.
Vi received the paper back and imagined that the F on the top stood for her Freedom.

Ronnie appeared at her side, waving his B which she knew without reading stood for Bullshit.

“What you get Poorchild?”

She handed him her paper.

“Fuck.”

“No Freedom.”

“Freedom will soon mean free to work for food.” Ronnie began reading. A stream of warm air escaped from his pursed lips. “You are on some real shit right here Poorchild. Ahead of your time.” He read the remarks on the bottom. “He’s going to give you a chance to revise it. Leave it to me. I’ll dumb it down for Dr. Dotherightthing.”

Vi could not understand why this beautiful strong boy was helping her, and she could not think of any way to find out save asking him. So she did. “Why?”

It seemed as if Ronnie had finally been asked a question that he did not have an answer to.

“Why do you care if I fail or not? Why do you help me?”

“Poorchild, I am you. And we have to help ourselves don’t we. There are no knights in shining armor coming for either of us.” He playfully pushed his shoulder against hers. “He’s giving you until Monday to revise. I’ll have it for you by Saturday.”

Vi stepped into the Attic. She didn’t have to look at the clock to know it was at least thirty minutes past her assigned start time. Dr. Locke was where he always was, behind his desk pushing his marker across a formerly unmarked control sheet. His immutability was beginning to
not surprise her. The printer played a background rhythm to her approach. As she approached his desk he dropped the marker and looked directly at her.

“Ms. Moon. Glad you could join us this afternoon.” *Click click clack*

She took the list from his hand unsure if she should apologize, or get to. Just as she began to move toward an empty cart he spoke.

“You don’t like it here Ms. Moon?” *Click click clack click click clack*

“Of course I do. I enjoy working here.”

“What do you enjoy most regarding your employ?” *Click click clack click clack*

“The solitude is nice.”

*Clack clack click click click click*. “The solitude? But you are surrounded Ms. Moon.” He pulled the print-out off of the printer. “Your history surrounds you. These underappreciated manuscripts of our collective past sits in direct opposition to solitude.” He wiped his hand across his damp forehead as his focus moved to the white sheet of paper in his hand. A streak of red followed his fingers. “This is reprehensible. How could they? This must be a mistake.” Locke picked up a phone that Vi had not seen until that moment. Had it always been there? “Dr. Shamus, this is Dr. Locke from the Attic. I need to talk to you. I just received a report that cannot be right. The Dhuoda of Septimania’s Liber Manualis is going into permanent storage. *clack clack clack clack click*

How is that possible? *click click click click click* Dhouda’s handbook for William? *click click*

Yes I have continued to edit the pull list. That is my preoccupation. *click clack click click click* I understand, but these bean counters don’t understand the importance of each of these voices.

Can you define culture? What would we be if we only valued the popular? *clack click* Dr. Shamus please let the record show that this is under extreme protest and the educational pursuits of our student body will surely be hindered by this blatant censorship. *click click click Good Day*
Dr. Shamus.” Dr. Locke wrote in The Dhuoda of Septimania’s Liber Manualis next to his red slash on the paper and handed it to Vi. “Forgive them for they know not what they do. Ms. Moon. Be sure to bring this book directly to me. Do you understand?”

She nodded, and he returned to scanning and slashing as if she had disappeared along side his need for her. The rhythmic clatter of the printer continued to provide an external heartbeat to his protestations.

Vi pushed the cart into the elevator and pushed the up arrow. Despite his eccentricities, Vi admired Locke. There was something in his essence that she wanted to copy. He seemed at ease. Certainly not with all things external, the external world was as foreign to him as this place was to her, but his ease with his singularity. Was that it? He was alone, but he wrapped that solitude around himself like bulletproof glass. The wheels of the cart stopped suddenly. Something had wrapped itself around the wheel well, stymieing rotation. As she moved to untangle the front wheel, she bumped into a chair that someone had pushed back from the table and left to block her path. She sat in it. She was in the Classics, again. She wasn’t looking for it, just as she was not looking for the chair, at least not with her whole mind. Yet it found her, just like the first one had. Moon. Was it a sign? Another E. Moon. But it was not him. This was Brenda first. Mycenean Civilization. Did that mean that she didn’t belong to her? She leaned up against the cart, as she read Brenda E. Moon’s take on the Myceneans. In the dark cool recesses of the Classics, sitting in the chair that had found her, sleep came easy.

He was God-like, completely capable of making a world in eight, if not seven days. His hands held hers. They were rough and raised where the skin had grown over itself as a means of self-preservation. She could not see his eyes, but she knew they were a reflection of hers. After all, he was her father. She stood in her place naked above his people, their people. They were as
multitudinous as the desert sand that they stood on. Then they came for her. The women first, then the men, or were the women the men. They covered her with mud, or was it red clay. It was cold and warm against her exposed skin. The movement from one place to another was indistinguishable. Then she was at the top of a pyramid, alone. Her father was a distant God in crimson and gold robes; a face without a nose: a lion with the head of a king. She stood at the mouth of the hungry pyramid. It waited for her. Her sacrifice was to mean the survival of a people. The crops would be plentiful fertilized by her spilled blood. It was only through her body that they all would survive, and though she wasn’t sure that she was willing, she knew the choice was not hers. The men formed a wall of brown behind, and the vastness of the pyramid’s black bottom stood in front of her. Her father with no face and every face nodded, and she stepped forward.

She woke to the dull moldiness of untraversed pages. Her head rested uneasily against the metal cart. She could feel the mark it had left behind across her cheek. The absence of windows in the Classics made her unable to tell how long she had been sleeping. She pushed the cart quickly, knowing she would be missed. This time she wasn’t surprised by him. He sat between the Romans and the Greeks. The color of his jersey was gold emblazoned with crimson greek letters across every empty space. Stubble had replaced the sheen on his shaved head.

“I almost didn’t recognize you without the black.”

He looked at her and through her. He stood and began to gather his things.

She didn’t know why she needed to keep him there. But the thought of watching those Greek letters receding moved something at her center. “Don’t leave.”

He placed his yellow legal pad into his bag.
“Guess it all worked out for you.”

He zipped his backpack.

“The party. The chain.”

He placed the straps across his shoulders.

“I hope I didn’t make your load heavier. I was just trying to help you carry it.”

He put his bag back onto the table. “That was you?”

Vi nodded and sat down at the table.

He looked toward the exit sign and then sat back down. He pulled the legal pad back out and began to write again as if she had disappeared with his fear of her.

She watched him write without lifting his pen or looking up. “Are you writing a paper?”

He stopped writing as if surprised to hear her voice. “No.”

“A book.”

“No.” He looked up from the notebook. “A letter.”

“To who?”

“To whom. My father.”

“Does your father like words?”

“No.” He placed his # 2 pencil into the crease of his legal pad. “He likes to say he is a man of very few words.”

“Then why are you giving him so many?”

He smiled as if he was telling an inside joke to an insider. “Because I like words.”

“You could have fooled me.”
He laughed then. It was not a full practiced laugh. He laughed as if he was not used to laughing. It reminded Vi of her attempts to smile when she had first reached campus. The sides of his mouth softened. “You like words?”

She nodded, suddenly unable to claim any words for herself.

“Your favorites?”

“Diasporic condition. Imagined community. Familial legacy.”

He laughed again. “What does any of that mean?”

“Nothing and everything.”

He smiled, and something inside of Vi lifted. “Are you hungry?”

She nodded.

“Can I feed you?”

She answered without hesitation. “Yes.”

Vi left the entangled cart and Brenda Moon and followed the boy to Skinner’s Chicken at the bottom of the hill. Their mutual love for words was swallowed in silence. Sound did not belong to them. He ordered a chicken dinner for two, and Vi filled in the white space with herself as she ate what he fed her. When they had rendered the remains to bones, she spoke. “Why did you pledge?”

“For my father.”

“You must love your father very much.”

“Can you love something you don’t know?”

“Of course.”

“Of course?” He smiled that newborn smile. “Of course.” Then he read his letter to her.
Father, I hope you are well. I have done what you wanted. I have crossed the burning sands. I am branded GNu. I have fulfilled your legacy. I hate it here. I miss my room, my home, mother and our time. I don’t like it here. I don’t know the people. They don’t know me. I don’t like it here. I have done what you wanted so please send me back to where I was before I was here. Send me back. I want to do what I was doing before what I am doing now. It is hot here. Very hot and I don’t like hot places. Send me back to where I was before I was here. How is mother? Is she still away? I would like to be away with her. Send me back to where I was before I was here. I do not belong here. I do not belong here. These people are foreign to me. I am foreign to these people. They smell different. They talk different. They eat different food. They read different books. Send me back to where I was before I was here. I REMEMBER. No matter how long I am here I will never forget. My memory is long. Longer than any amount of time you can keep me away. I remember mother’s face. I remember my room. I remember my home. I remember. Please send me back to where I was before I was here. With the love of a son to his father, Perrion Alabaster Cannon VII

Vi didn’t know what to say. She understood wanting to go back. But Before was gone. There was no return, but she couldn’t be the one to tell him that he could never go back. She didn’t want to see his face change back.

“Perrion the Seventh. You are one of seven. You are a legacy.” She breathed sound into what she had known in soundlessness from the first moment she’d seen the chains eating away the outer layer of his skin.

“Call me Perry.”

“My name is Viola Ikewke Moon. One of one. Call me Vi.” She sucked on a chicken bone.

“So your father asked you to pledge?”
“No. He didn’t have to ask. I just knew that he wanted me to.” He lit a match and touched it tenderly to the edge of his letter. “Our family history is well-documented.” He said it with another man’s voice and face. “We have been a part of north Georgia for centuries. In Albany for the last hundred.” They both watched as the page turned blue and then red and then black, crumbling into the ashtray on the table.

“That must be wonderful. To be born into so many.”

His first face and voice returned. “To know my great grandchild’s name before I know my child’s mother.” He took a bite of Vi’s chicken. “It doesn’t feel wonderful. It feels like a cage.”

“If it’s a cage, why do you want to go back?”

He shrugged. “It’s where I’m from.”

“Where you are from.” She understood.

They walked back to his room in Lincoln’s Hall and without asking she went in with him. She reached for his arms to place them around her, and he cringed. Before she could steady herself to back away, he grabbed her arm. He pulled the jersey over his head with one hand, exposing a block of white gauze across his heart that was seeping pink. She dug at the edges of the tape. He moved away but then moved back toward her. She didn’t not want to remove anymore of what the GNu’s had already taken. It was pink and wet. The greek symbols that were emblazoned across his jersey had burned through to his chest. Vi kissed it. He shrunk back.

“It won’t heal covered up.” She knew scars. She took off her shirt and placed his hand on the question mark circling her breast.

He kissed it, and then pulled condoms from his dresser.

She threw them back into the drawer. “Nothing between us?”

He seemed to understand. “Nothing between us.”
She sat outside of Dr. Dotherightthing’s office. He wanted to see her. She had revised the Moon paper, or Ronnie had revised the paper, but wasn’t that the same? Weren’t they the same? Vi waited patiently for the professor, that she did not like but was unsure why, to open his door. It was a good day. She had not had the Dream since the first time. Maybe it was all her imagination. Maybe she had imagined last summer too; the thing that had led to the cutting. She’d thought if she removed them, than her and Cecilia could go back to Before. That they would be the same again. Maybe Cecilia had been right to stop her from finishing. But Vi had known, like she’d known that she could not digest eggs, that the answer was to remove them. But she had not had the Dream again, so maybe it was all moot. Moot. It was one of Perry’s favorite words. She smiled at the memory of him. Maybe she had not been right. The door to Dr. Dotherighthing’s office finally opened.

The smile disappeared. “Hi Professor.”

“Just call me Dr. Dotherightthing.”

She laughed. So he was not as self-involved as Vi had thought. She had been wrong. She followed him inside the small office, surprised at the disorganized mess piled atop the desk. He seemed to be the kind of man that kept track of both the frequency and consistency of his bowel movements. It wasn’t until he waved her over to a spotless desk crammed into a corner that she realized that she hadn’t been wrong. He was both.

He followed eyes to the messy desk. “I apologize. I’m a bit of a hoarder.”

It must have been the other face. The one she had seen for a moment the other day in class. The one he tried to keep hidden, like an evil twin. The invisible other’s desk was stacked with the likes of Mama Day and 100 years of Solitude. Emptiness took the place of the missing frozen
smiles on the bare desk Dr. Dotherightthing was now sitting behind. She was reminded of her own shared spaced before; Danielle’s excess and her emptiness.

“Viola, do you have your first draft.”

“Vi. Yes I do.” She handed him the single-spaced diatribe, now more red than black and white. The F seemed large and redder as he flipped through the pages.

“Honestly.” He sat back in his chair. “I thought your first draft was much more interesting.”

“Is that what the F meant?”

His lips bent at the corners, but no teeth were displayed. “The F was a reflection of the structure, not the content. Your ideas, when I could grasp them, were compelling.” He pulled out her and Ronnie’s paper. “This is almost the opposite. Structure with little to no compelling content.”

“You’re greedy.” The veiled had risen, and her disdain was on display.

“Pardon me.” He blinked toward ocular clarity or to warn her to retreat.

Vi wasn’t sure why, but in this little crammed corner of empty, sitting across from this controlled twin of himself, she didn’t feel the need to run. “You want everything. No one can have everything.”

“I’m not sure what you mean Ms. Moon. I don’t want…”

“Everything. You’re surrounded by nothing to try to make it appear that there is nothing you want. But that’s not true. You want brilliance, but you want it dumbed-down. Brilliance does not adhere to structure. Some things simply can’t coexist.”

The corners of his mouth began to move again. Was he baring his teeth at her? “That’s the voice that’s missing from the first piece.”

“I changed it because that voice got an F.”
His mouth flew open then. He was laughing. It was big and booming and out of control. She would never have imagined it coming from this controlled man. Maybe from the face that had appeared for moment as he looked past her in class, but not this face sitting across from her. “You have an excellent point. If I would have gotten this one first, you probably would have gotten an A out of the box. But your first paper was intriguing, and this simply isn’t. Where is the inherent lie of written histories? The impossibility of a concrete truth? You couldn’t move past them in your first draft.”

“It’s there. In the margins. To critique written histories in writing is to contradict my whole argument. History is not a thing. It is a specific place at a specific moment in time. How does one recover that? Can you raise the dead? Can you control context? It is completely and utterly unrecoverable.”

“But does that mean we abandon its analysis?”

“I don’t know, but we only have now. Everything before is lost.”

This closed man’s face was suddenly wide open, reaching for understanding that Vi did not feel able or qualified to give him. Why had she not taken one of Ronnie’s pills before this meeting?

“That’s where you lose me. Your argument becomes circular. It keeps returning to an indistinct beginning.”

“Isn’t that what everything does? Don’t we all end where we started? And if we do, what’s the point of trying to go back. We will all end there eventually. That’s why you teach what you teach? The histories of our people? The patterns? You’re really teaching us about ourselves, right?”
He laughed that uncontrolled laugh again and nodded his head up and down. He wrote something across the top of the paper.

She looked down at the A in red. He understood? “Does this A stand for Acquiescence?”

His full-faced laughter followed her out of his office.

She didn’t want to want it, but the A felt good in her hand. She had gotten it without hiding her true self. She had gotten it without medical intervention. She had gotten it. She wondered where Ronnie was. His terrible paper had been key in Dr. Dotherightthing’s recognition of her first paper. Ronnie liked to sit at the center of Booker T.’s Four fountains and pretend he was the fifth, spewing revolution instead of stale water, so she headed toward Booker T. She was crossing at the center, when she saw him/them. Perry and his frat brothers were moving as if one six-headed, red and gold snake with arms and legs. He was the head. Booker T.’s majestic projections leaped over their heads. The same compulsion she’d felt the day she’d almost broken the chain bubbled up inside of her. The snake of red and gold pushed others out of their path, but she asserted her new-founded strength. Was that a Super A? Did it make her impenetrable to testosterone-fueled snakes? The boy that was a piece stopped inches from her. He looked up into her smiling face before dropping his eyes and slithering the line to the left of her rooted feet.

“Are you blind? Move!” It was as if the voice was coming from another place.

Perry had reversed his gaze, and rendered her invisible or had she imagined him? Them? Had he ever really fed her?

“Ju stop.”

That voice broke the legacy’s spell on Vi. She turned. It was Danielle and Juju. Danielle’s small hand clutched at his arm. He was standing inches away from Vi. Before she could form a
response to a question that she was not sure she’d been asked, Perry’s voice rang out over all of them.

“Tittie in my mouth and ass in my hand nobody fucks like a Gamma Nu man. But if I die before I come Leave your legs spread open so my frat can get some.”

The cadence was soon repeated by the remainder of the snake.

“Danielle you need to tell your girl that when she sees the GNu’s coming through, she better learn how to make room.”

Vi did not see the look of apology in Danielle’s eyes as she passed, still clinging to the arm of the bald black greek man because her eyes were glued to the back of the back of Perrion Alabaster Cannon VII’s head. Did his father share that wrinkle right above the nape of his neck?

Long fingers suddenly blocked her view from behind. With one sense blocked, the legacy’s words move toward her center. His disavowal rang in her ears as she imagined him being swallowed whole by the collective of the red and gold. She turned to Ronnie’s smiling face.

His smile fell and his eyebrows moved together. “Are you okay? Did those Chocolate Neanderthals do anything to you?”

Vi pulled Ronnie in the opposite direction of the angry-faced man, Danielle, the legacy and the red and gold snake and sat him at the center of the fountain. “We got an A.” She handed him the crumpled damp sheets that just moments before had been proof of her power.

“Dr. Dotherightthing did the right thing.” A strange smile played at the corners of his lips. “Damn. We must celebrate.”

Celebrate. “Celebrate?” Vi tried to push the snake out of her mind’s eye and recapture the feeling of before; Dr. Bennett’s acquiescence. “I don’t feel like…”

“Trust me Poorchild.”
Trust? She didn’t even trust herself? Her own eyes and ears. How could she trust Ronnie? But she pretended to and followed him to the parking lot. She kept pretending as he began unlocking a sky blue pinto that had seen much better days. She stopped pretending when the car refused to start after two tries.

Ronnie’s response to her obvious distrust was laughter. It reminded her of Dr. Dotherightthing’s laugh. Not because it was the same, but the way they both echoed a contradiction. Ronnie’s laughed was small and controlled, yet it filled up the rusted sky on wheels. “I know it’s a piece of shit, but it’s mine. Blue Thunder.” The car coughed violently and roared into drive, reiterating Ronnie’s christening.

Vi thought the name was a lot for the car to live up to. “Please tell me where we are going?”

He opened his lips in a whisper. “Quincy.”

She didn’t recognize this tight-lipped version of Ronnie. “What is Quincy?”

“My hometown. I never told you I was from Quincy? Now sit back and enjoy the view.”

Tallahassee was no Chicago, but compared to Quincy it was a bustling metropolis. The transition into the unincorporated township was startling. Preplanned housing developments and strip malls quickly dissipated into mobile homes and emaciated horses. It wasn’t long before they were the only ones on the narrow two-lane highway. Evergreens canopied both sides of the winding road, and at times Vi was doubtful if Blue Thunder was actually up to the task Ronnie had set before it. Before Vi had solidified her argument for returning to campus, they were turning onto a gravel road.

Ronnie lowered the volume on the radio that had been blasting mostly static for the last two miles. He nodded toward a small neat clapboard home about half a mile off the gravel road.

“Don’t want to disturb Crazy Mary.”
“What?” Vi inspected the house for anything that would suggest a crazy woman abided within it, but she saw no signs.

“Nothing.” He shook his head and turned off the gravel road onto a red dirt road.” Here we go. Home sweet home.”

The house was bigger than she expected. For whatever reason she’d pictured Ronnie coming from some ramshackled lean-to in need of whitewashing, instead this was a sprawling Victorian, sitting in the midst of fields of lush acreage. It was Southfork instead of the Roots revision she’d imagined.

An older man sat on the porch, watching their approach with laughter in his eyes. He stood once the cloud of Blue Thunder had settled. He hugged Ronnie the way men hug those they cherish. “RJ? Mom didn’t say nothing about you coming home today.”

“It was a last minute thing Daddy. Momma in the house?”

“Where else she gone be?”

“This is my girl, Poor Vi. Vi this is my Dad.”

Vi looked at Ronnie. He shrugged. The man who bore no mark of relation to Ronnie, stepped forward and extended his hand, giving Ronnie a high five behind her back. Ronnie was different here; his voice deeper; his manner stiffer. Was this his genuine self, or was the one she’d loved first real? The smell of simmering pinto beans greeted them as they entered the house. Cecilia Before had loved pinto beans served with chunks of sweet onion and thick slices of heirloom tomatoes.

Ronnie entered the house with casual familiarity. “Momma! Where you run off to?”
“Is that my baby Ronnie, screaming through my house like I never taught him better?” She came in a bustle of warmth with her round face shining from both the heat and her excitement. She grabbed Ronnie with both hands and kissed him on both cheeks.

Ronnie blushed, avoiding Vi’s amused eyes. “Sorry Momma. I just wanted you to meet my friend. Vi. This is my Momma, Ms. Esther.”

“Vi?” She approached Vi with the same loving touch that she’d extended to Ronnie.

“Short for Viola ma’am.” Vi didn’t want Ms. Esther to release her from her warm soft arms. But she did, and held Vi as arms length, expecting her with a smile. “Viola. Now that’s a strong name. Who carried it before you?”

“Ma’am?” Vi was unsure of how to answer her.

“That there is a name been passed down. Who you named for?”

“My father’s mother.” That she was sure of, at least that it what Cecilia had told her.

She shook her head in the way older woman acknowledge that they knew they were right. Ms. Esther walked into the kitchen, and they followed. She took an iron skillet out of the stove and placed it on a trivet shaped like a rooster. “Ya’ll just in time for supper. This cornbread hot out the oven.”

Vi’s stomach began to do flips. She had not anticipated the hunger awakened by this kitchen’s familiarity.

“Not right now Momma. We gone go on down to the Red Oak for a bit.” Ronnie grabbed Vi’s hand.

Vi wanted to snatch her hand out of his. She didn’t want to go visit any oak tree. She wanted to sit down at this table in this warm kitchen and have supper with Mr. Ron and Ms. Esther.

“Okay baby. You all take something cold with you. It is sure a hot one today.”
“Yes ma’am.”

Vi let Ronnie guide her out of the house. Blue Thunder didn’t have AC and neither did Ronnie’s parent’s house, so she had been out in the real Florida weather for longer than she had ever been. Vi and Ronnie walked past at least ten perfectly formed red oak trees before he opened an old gate and gestured for her to follow him. “Come on.”

Vi pointed at the only thing that seemed to be from this century in the vicinity. “But the sign says No trespassing.”

“Who you think put that No trespassing there? Come on Poorchild.” Ronnie walked her through the cemetery, explaining the relation, temperament and circumstance of each inhabitant. He stopped suddenly in front of a relatively headstone. “This is my grandmother Sue. Oooh she loved her some baby Ronnie, and I loved me some her.” He got on his knees in front of her headstones, and looked up at Vi, waiting for her to follow suit.

Vi continued to stand. “I don’t pray.”

Ronnie didn’t respond. He just pulled her down next to him. “Just ask Grandma Sue for what you want?”

“Ask who?”

“It doesn’t really matter which one you talk to. Ask Grandma Sue, or Great Aunt Tara or Uncle Lucius.”

“But they are all dead.”

“I know that’s why you should ask them. What good are ancestors if you can’t ask them for something?”

“But these are your ancestors not mine. I don’t know have people.”

“Everyone has people. You didn’t just hatch. Who raised you?”
“My mother mostly, but my father was there for a little, but I can’t remember him.”

“Is he dead?”

Vi shrugged. She had never asked, and Cecilia had never told her.

“Dead or alive, they’re still your people. I haven’t talked to my mother in years, and that doesn’t stop me from coming out here.”

“What do you mean you haven’t talked to your mother. Who was that talkative imposter I just met?”

“Momma Esther is my stepmother. She helped Daddy raised me after my mother left us.”

Ronnie closed his eyes and pressed his palms together. “See. Anybody can be your people. All you need is two willing souls. And Momma Esther and me were both willing.”

“You’re lucky, you know that.”

“If I am, then you are. What’s mine is yours Poorchild.” He waved his hand over the cemetery stones.

“What an inheritance?” Vi laughed, and Ronnie shoved her, so she had to readjust in the rocky grass. Her knees were beginning to hurt, and she figured it would be easier to pretend and be able to get up and out of this place and back to Momma Esther’s warm hands and hot-buttered cornbread.

Ronnie rolled his eyes up in his head.“ Just ask them. What can it hurt?”

He was right. What could it hurt? So she mimicked Ronnie, pressing her palms together. She spoke into them the way she used to when she was too young to realize the futility of all of it. She thought of asking for the return of Cecilia Before but stopped. That would be too much for any borrowed dead ancestors on the first go round. She decided to make it smaller. Perry at the
head of the snake. Bring Perry to me. Bring Perry to me she repeated again without sound. She opened her eyes to see Ronnie watching her, smiling.

“Good Poorchild. You’ll see. Grandma Sue does not play. You’ll see.”

By the time Ronnie dropped her back in front of Tubman’s Tower, she had talked herself out of Ronnie’s faith in the power of ancestors, and into her new belief in southern cooking and hospitality. Ms. Esther’s cooking had settled easily in her stomach. But her disbelief in ancestors was pushed to the edges of belief when she saw him standing at the foot of Tower D. Was this the power of ancestors? Could they move the son of seven to the foot of her tower? He was staring up at her window, waiting.

He turned when he heard her. “Hello.” He had on jeans and a one of those golf shirts that people never played golf in.

“You see me?”

He nodded as he studied the chipped red polish on Vi’s toes.

“Are you sure you see me?”

“Yes.” He said, but he did not raise his eyes to hers.

Vi pushed past him and climbed the stairs to 203D, but soft pelts of dirt greeted her from the window. She opened it without hesitating.

“I see you. Can I talk?” He pulled his legal pad out of his book bag. “I have the words to explain right here. Please let me read it to you.”

She could not say no. Vi was on the second floor, but it seemed the architects of the tower had factored in apologetic lovers because it was an easy climb for Perry. She sat on Danielle’s old side of the room, while he sat on her bed. He began to read.
I am not what I pretend to be, so that means I can never stop pretending. I am not what I pretend to be, so if I stop pretending they will know and I will be stuck in between here and there. I cannot return to there so I am stuck here and if I am stuck here I must pretend. I was only pretending earlier. I could never not see you. I could never not see you. Please understand to be here I must pretend. I have no choice. We have no choice. We can both pretend. We can both pretend. With my sincerest regards. Your friend Perry.

By the time he reached sincerest regards Vi had already pushed his words from earlier to Before. She extended her hand and he took it. They laid down together on the abandoned side of 203D. There was nothing between them and the small thin mattress, and Vi could feel the individual springs collapse against her backside as he pushed himself inside of her. He winced as he rubbed his barely healed brand against her. When she woke up he was gone, but she knew that leaving her had hurt because the bulk of his scab was stuck to her chest.

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The ride back from the hospital was quiet. Cecilia couldn’t remember a time when there had not been a multitude of meaning tumbling between them. It was as if they had not only cut off her breasts, but her ability to move sound into meaning.

“How do you feel?”

Cecilia understood the words, but could not reach under them to get to the center of her second chance child’s meaning. Without knowing Vi’s true meaning how could she respond? “Fine.”

“Fine? Good.”

There it was again; sounds and words, but true meaning escaped her. Cecilia wanted to tell Vi to turn around, and take her back to the hospital. She had not given them permission to take this. She had not authorized the erasure of what had flowed between her and her child.

“You’ll let me know if you need anything, won’t you?” Vi already spoke of her as if they were distant acquaintances, instead of mother and child.

“Of course I will. Don’t worry. I’ll be fine.” Cecilia searched Vi’s profile for understanding. She waited for her to pull the car to the curb and lay her head where her breasts had been. The heart that had pumped life for both of them was still there, beating underneath the bandages, stitches and scars. Cecilia waited, but Vi kept her eyes on the road and her hands on the wheel at ten and two. It was probably better that the meaning had been excised. If Cecilia could understand her, what would she do with that meaning? Would she still let her leave in less than a year? Yes this had to be done. It would be easier for Vi now if Cecilia kept her meaning to herself. She had gotten accepted into her top choice; A&M University. She would be so far from
home. It would take this much to push the child South. Cecilia’s dream was now completely her own. There was no longer anyway for it to seep from her mother’s milk to Vi. Her overburdened nipples had been removed with the cancer. Vi would have to be her own woman. She was now officially and irretrievably a bottle baby. Cecilia laughed like she had Before. Vi stopped the car. Had she understood? Had she heard it all in the laugh? Vi pulled the car into the familiar garage. They were home. The laugh had not meant anything to her second chance child. She had heard nothing but an escape of air. The doctors had taken it all.

“Are you hungry?”

“No. I can’t keep anything down. I think I just want to sleep for a few days.”

The child looked concerned.

Cecilia smiled in an effort to erase the concern, but it did not leave.

The child helped her unbuttoned the mumu Cecilia had been forced to leave the hospital in. She watched her hesitant back move toward the bedroom door.

“You can stay. Like Before.”

“I don’t want to.” Vi’s eyes moved toward the bandages under the night gown. “Hurt you.”

“Just sleep at my back.” The child hesitated, so Cecilia held out her hand, and she took it.

“We’ll be fine.”

The stillness hanging over the crib alarmed her. But there was no way to move the alarm through her. Cecilia held the baby in her arms like she had done hundreds of times before. She looked down at the girlchild in her arms. The child’s eyes did not leave her face. The child’s head moved to the right, rooting for her breast. She hesitated before placing the child to her flaccid breast. The suckling child did not sigh from relief. No milk flowed. She tried to remove her breast from the child’s mouth, but the pressure was too great. A scream started in her navel,
but would go no further. The echo of the child’s unsatiated suckling could be felt in every bone of Cecilia’s body. The sound echoed through the very center of her. The scream that started in her navel was pulled through her middle by the painful thunder that raked through at each pull on her nipple. The scream burst through like a dam being uncorked. Cecilia woke feeling for nipples that were no longer there. She bit her lip to keep from screaming the scream that was still inside of her. Vi’s breathing was irregular and ragged. She should not be here. Cecilia did not want to wake her, but she should not be here. The dream was too much. She did not want to share this Vi. Cecilia remembered the man that she had loved in the day and cursed in the night. He had left and never returned. Vi should not be here. Cecilia shook her. She woke too suddenly. She had not meant to alarm her, but did not know how not to.

“Go to bed.”

“What?” Vi was still somewhere between sleep and wakefulness.

“Go to your bed. You will be seventeen soon. Time you learned to sleep alone.”

“But.”

“But nothing. Viola Moon get out of my bed.” She watched her second chance child leave her bed with sadness and confusion. She needed this child to be in front of her, not behind her. The only thing behind her was pain, and the only person who had ever been next to her, had left. This was Ellington Moon’s child, but she would not follow the same path.
She walked into her sociology class, easily connecting the low rumbling sound to meaning. Ronnie was easy to spot in the midst of the rumbling signifiers. He radiated light like cartoon depictions of power lines. When Dr. Bennett entered the classroom, Ronnie’s light shone even brighter. Vi was forced to look away.

“Good Afternoon. Today we’re going to discuss the Black man, specifically the African American man. Dubois spoke of a double consciousness. Can anyone explain what he meant by that?”

Ronnie’s hand shot up with a fierceness that he had heretofore saved for extracurricular revolutionary activities. “Dubois was referring to the way in which blacks viewed themselves. They had to pretend to be one thing in front of white folks, and they were something else to themselves. Two-faced.”

“Right. Dubois suggested that this two-facedness forced a burden on the African American male that didn’t exist for the white male or even the African male. Can you imagine the consistent strain of having to double think every move, every word, every thought, has on the psyche? The strain of leading a double life has to manifest, and these manifestations are most clearly identifiable when one compares the divergences between the African male and the African American male. Does anyone know what the most distinct divergence is?”

No one offered a response.

“Homosexuality.”

The class began to giggle.
“No class this is very serious. Homosexuality is one of the most catastrophic manifestations of racism for the black male.”

It was as if someone pulled the plug on Ronnie. The light disappeared so quickly that Vi wondered if she hadn’t invented it in the first place. Maybe it had simply been a manifestation of her growing feelings for Perry. Even so she wanted Dr. Bennett to shut-up, so Ronnie’s light would come back on, but he didn’t.

“Homosexuality is not an African phenomenon. It is a European construction that black men have been seduced by. Homosexuality can be directly attributed to racial psychosis. It is America’s psychological warfare at its best.”

Vi waited for Ronnie to launch into a diatribe that he had been preparing his entire life to deliver, but he was trapped in voicelessness.

“The gay Black male is an emasculated black male that has internalized that emasculation. A man belongs at the head of his family.”

“Genetically?” She waited for Ronnie, trying to recall the words he had verbalized over and over to her.

“Of course. The Africans did not have a word in their language for homosexuality. It is an American construction. In short it is the American construction of the perfect nigger.”

She opened her mouth to respond, but couldn’t. Vi knew it was a lie, but it was not the lie that she had been preparing to defend against her entire life. This was Ronnie’s lie. She couldn’t speak in his voice. She had only her own words. And they were not good enough.

Ronnie left then. He placed his book and notebook in his backpack and walked out of the class. His departure was followed by a collective of white noises that Vi could no longer distinguish over the sound of the door closing behind her friend.
She wasn’t sure why she didn’t follow him. Maybe because she was finally feeling the light at the end of the tunnel, maybe because she finally felt she had a handle on how to push herself back toward normality. Whether that normality was her authentic self or constructed self she didn’t know. It wasn’t until she sat down in the quad and meaning broke through sound that she was sure of why she did not follow Ronnie.

“Crazy Bitch.”

She still got it every now and then. Usually it was one of the GNus’s, like this time; another Man of the Red and Gold. They were like elephants. They never forgot, and she wanted them to forget. She had tried to cut them off from their rememory by breaking the chain. That had been both unthinkable and maybe unforgettable. It was a part of them that was outside of memory. It had its own legs and arms and breath. But if she was to save herself and survive here, she needed that rememory to die, and walking out with her gay best friend would not help her kill it. She wasn’t surprised by the clump of red and gold that followed the insult. The clump was the point, wasn’t it? She tried to refocus on her notes. She would have to write another paper soon, and after her passive disavowal, she was pretty sure she wouldn’t be able to count on Ronnie.

“Can I feed you?”

Her future interrupted her past. The smile crept across her face, spreading her full lips wide across her crooked smile.

“Of course.”

The answer came before she was ready, and the voice was not hers. By the time she had willed herself enough courage to turn, she could only see their backs. The voice that was not hers was taller than Vi. Perry’s hand rested easily on the small of her back, guiding her out of the door. They walked together like two halves reunited. They stopped by Booker T.’s Four
Fountains, strolled past Dubois’ lane, and rested on the steps of Truth’s Hall. He pushed her hair from her eyes. They embraced in the way that people in love embraced. Was he pretending? She couldn’t see his eyes. Was he pretending now, or when he would crawl through her window in between night and day? She moved closer in an attempt to see his eyes and to be more sure about this man that was her future. Perry and the girl that was not Vi descended the steps of Truth’s Hall and headed down the hill to the place where he had fed her first. They walked by the evergreen shrubs that had been cut and sliced and trimmed out of their natural form into an A and a M and a U. Sound stopped her from following them. It was coming from the shrubs. She began to call out to Perry, but could not place the appropriate words next to each other in a way that would convey her true meaning. She had thought the dream was only a dream, but now the sounds coming from the mangled shrubs were unmistakable. Would he be able to hear this dream/memory that had decided to climb out of the theoretical? Would Perry understand how thin the line was between the real and imagined? He was too busy building his own imaginary self. That girl, like the red and gold he wore across his back and burned into his chest, was a prop; an imagined construction. But that didn’t erase the fact that the baby was audible from behind those sheared evergreens, and Vi was awake. This was no dream. Vi had thought that Perry had made the child’s hunger moot; chased her back into the nether regions of a long forgotten history. But there she was, and Perry was climbing down the hill with another girl. As Vi retreated, so did the sound, but it wasn’t until she had found the safety of Tubman’s Towers that true silence returned. She longed for familiarity. The phone stood between her and the isolation of her room.

— Cecilia?

— How have you been?
— Well. You?
— Fine.

— Are you still there?

— Vi?
— I’m still here. The dream has stopped.

— But I heard her today.
— Who?
— Our baby.

— Vi stop it. You are my baby and you don’t have a baby.

— I mean the one from the dream. She’s climbed out of my dreams. She’s tired of waiting.

— For what?
— To be fed.

— Vi. Please stop. This is all in your imagination.

— Does that make her hunger less real?

— Of course it does. Vi?
— Yes Cecilia.

— Call Dr. Gabrielle.

— Call Dr. Gabrielle. Please. For me.

— For you. I’ve got to go now.
Vi put the phone back in its place, with no intention of calling Dr. Gabrielle. That was her broken fragmented past; her Before. She was here in this place now in this place steeped in history and tradition, a place that she had not known belonged to her. She would be here, even if it meant she had to be here without Cecilia; Cecilia had not figured it out. The child’s hunger. Had she tried to feed her? Had Cecilia failed? Cecilia had thought love was enough. Cecilia had chosen the wrong man, even if Dr. Gabrielle did not agree.

— *Tell me about your father.*

— *I don’t have a father.*

— *Everyone has a father.*

— *Everyone has a father?*

— *Yes.*

— *I keep trying to forget everything I remember about him.*

— *Why?*

— *It hurts.*

— *What?*

— *The rememory. I only see him in my sleep now.*

— *What do you see?*

— *No Face. Only feeling.*

— *What feeling do you see?*

— *That he loved me and Cecilia more than anything.*

— *That sounds lovely.*

— *How does one feel all that love one day and nothing the next? It hurts to recall the memory.*
— What happened to him?

—

— Do you ever discuss it with your mother?

— Does it matter why he’s gone? The absence is the same.

— You don’t think it matters if he left because of circumstances out of his control.

— Circumstances are always beyond control. He’s gone. He couldn’t have saved us. He was a piece too. He wasn’t a part of anything larger than himself. He and Cecilia were two broken pieces. You need more than two pieces to be whole.

— What do you mean?

— What does this have to do with my cancer?

— What cancer?

— My breast cancer. The reason I’m in this hospital.

— Vi you don’t have breast cancer.

— How do you know? Have you examined me?

— No. I’m not that kind of doctor. But I talked to your other doctors, and they have assured me that you do not have cancer.

— Not yet.

— Why are you so sure you will?

— Because Cecilia does.

— What do you mean?

— I mean she is me, and I am her.

—

—
— *Viola you do know that you and your mother are two separate individuals.*

—

— *Vi?*

— *Of course. Dr. Gabrielle. I’m not an idiot. Of course I know that.*

Vi would not repeat Cecilia’s mistake, but she had acted hastily. She should not have called Cecilia. She redialed the numbers she had just called.

— *Cecilia?*

— *Vi?*

— *I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have called you the first time. I’d just had a bad dream, and I was confused.*

— *I understand.*

— *I’m still getting used to sleeping alone.*

— *Alone? What about your roommate?*

— *It’s not the same. Are you okay?*

— *Me? Of course.*

— *I just don’t want you to worry. I am fine. Just a little tired.*

— *Get some rest.*

— *I will.*

— *I love you Vi.*

— *Me too.*

Love cannot make you whole. You cannot feed a hungry child love. 203D was colder than usual. The sounds of the child began in the corner of the room and reverberated to her center.
That girl that Perry was with was only a prop, and she would not turn back. She went to her desk drawer. She had to quiet the child, if only for a little while. She had to be able to pretend too. They were where she had left them. She popped the two pills without water. It took five minutes for the child’s noises to quiet, and her insides to unclench. Vi relaxed into her lonely bunk and closed her eyes. She had to be at the Attic soon, and she needed to rest.

She wasn’t sure if the attic was on zoom or out of focus after taking Ronnie’s pills. What she was sure of was that it was different. Not exactly different but not the same. Was the attic always this cold? Was it always this bright? The hum of the institutional lights buzzed a soft accompaniment to the inaction of the place. Dead and dying bugs trapped between the fluorescent tubes and opaque plastic covering sizzled helplessly. Did Dr. Locke always wear that worn corduroy blazer with the frayed sleeves? Was his black puffy hair always peppered with lint? The difference disturbed Vi, pushing her off balance like she had been in Chicago, like she had been around Cecilia Before, afraid to disturb the delicate balancing act that had established between the two of them. If clarity came to her only when under the influence, what was she? She seemed to be the only one aware of her new x-ray vision. Tunisia stood next to the elevator, waiting for Vi to grab her cart and join her. Dr. Locke raised his eyes in her direction momentarily. “New protocol Ms. Moon. You will be getting your control sheet directly from me.” He handed her the control sheet without words. When she reached for it, he held onto it for a second before releasing it into her grip. “The pulls in the right left corner are to come directly to me. Do you understand Ms. Moon?”

“Of course Dr. Locke. Just like last time.”
His eyes moved in the direction of Tunisia, but he lowered his voice so it would not bounce off the hard walls. “Exactly. Just like before.”

Vi moved quickly into the elevator with Tunisia and waited for the elevator doors to close. She could not trust her perception of Dr. Locke’s departure from his usual strange behavior due to her altered state. “Is he okay?”

Tunisia pressed her lips together in a false pout. “He’s upset over a missing Control Sheet. He says he gave it to me, but I know he didn’t. I don’t know why he’s tripping. What I want to steal a control sheet for? I got Control Sheets coming out of my ass.” She pointed toward the opening elevator doors. “Ain’t this you?”

Vi pushed the cart off the freight elevator. This also seemed new, like she had never been in this section of the library. She looked at her list. The Mediterranean. She should probably pull Dr. Locke’s books first, but Locke’s need was momentarily eclipsed by her need to search for a Moon. She just needed to find one, and then she could continue with her assigned task. She was so engrossed with her search that she almost didn’t hear him come up behind her, but even then she didn’t have to turn to know that it was him. She could feel the strength of his bloodlines.

He pressed his erect penis against her, forcing her to bend over the books she’d already pulled, and yanked her pants down around ankles. His breath was hot in her ear. “Nothing between us.”

She wanted to say no and yes. She wanted him inside of her, but not like this. But her clarity was less clear than it had just been, so she simply nodded. Nothing could ever be between them. That girl was nothing. He belonged to her as deeply as he was thrusting inside of her. But the grunts emanating from somewhere deep inside of her scared her. Was she one of those hungry shadow people that Tunisia had put on display that first day? Could she add Tunisia’s nasty girl
to her list of self? Something separated from the shelf in front of her. The shadow disappeared as quickly as it had split. She pushed Perry away from her and pulled up her pants. She shook her head. “This isn’t how it’s supposed to be.”

He pulled his pants up. “I won’t pretend with you.” He picked up his book bag and walked away.

The unedited Control sheet had fallen from her hand. She reached under the cart to retrieve it. It was wet and crumpled. She smoothed it out over the books on her cart, and pushed it to the elevator to start pulling from World Maps. Perry was gone, but she could still feel him behind her, pushing against her, needing her to feed him as much as she needed him to feed her. When she finished her pulls and headed back down to the Attic, Tunisia was already there, waiting. She showed Vi her teeth as she rolled her cart past her. “Nasty girl.”

Vi stopped pushing.

The sick laughter from that first day echoed off the tall walls. “Who that singing that nasty song? Who that doing that nasty dance?”

“Ms. Johnson, please refrain from making that horrible noise in my presence. I am trying to work.” The as yet silent Dr. Locke spoke.

“Sorry Dr. Locke. I just can’t get that song out of my head. Vi what about you? Don’t you just love that song?”

It was the type of question that didn’t wait for an answer. Vi looked at Dr. Locke, but he, of course, was marking a report.

“You’ve heard it. It’s an oldie but a goody. Janet Jackson. You know you’ve heard it.”

“I’m not that much of a pop music person.”

“I’ll put it on my ipod tonight and let you listen to it tomorrow.”
Vi looked back at Dr. Locke. He was still not watching her.

Tunisia left still humming the song, and Dr. Locke put down his permanent magic marker. Vi could smell Perry wafting from in between her thighs. Could Dr. Locke smell him too?

“Ms. Moon, my pulls?”

Vi stacked the books on the edge of the desk.

Dr. Locke smiled before sliding them onto another cart behind his desk. “I hope you realized that the isolation in this place is only imagined. There are eyes and ears all over the library, so be on guard.”

“Yes sir.” Had it been him splitting the dark in two in the middle of the Mediterranean?

“Overall you are doing a fine job, and with much less chatter than Ms. Johnson. But alas, I am unable to choose my staff. I must just accept whomever ACPAC and Dr. Cristabel send me. But I digress. I would not want to lose you over a mistaken impression. You must mind your guard. There are greater forces at work in this place.”

“I’ll do my best.” She couldn’t catch her breath in the stairway. She could smell Perry all over. It was as if he had marked her like a dog marks a tree. But it wasn’t like that. Perry was not a dog. He was different. He needed her as much as she needed him. She had heard his need. She’d felt his need. She had to find him.

Lincoln Hall’s courtyard was cold. Nat Turner stood at its center with white tulips blooming at his bared bronze feet. She imagined Perry’s face in place of Nat’s. His people knew their faces. They could recognize themselves in a crowd. They didn’t have to check mirrors for reference. Perry was the seventh son. She waited for what seemed like hours, but it could have been minutes.
When he walked into the courtyard, it was as if he expected to see her waiting there. “Are you upset?”

She shook her head from side to side.

He walked past her to the dorm’s side door and held it open. She followed him, climbing the steps behind him. His room was the picture of what a boy’s dorm room should be. “Vanessa is . I don’t want there to be anything between us.”

Vanessa. The girl who he had fed was named Vanessa. “I know what she means.”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing.”

He picked jeans and socks and t-shirts from the floor and pushed them into an already overstuffed duffle bag.

“Are you leaving?”

“Going.”

“Going where?

“Home.”

“Home?” Should she tell him now that there was no return; that going back was an impossibility, but she’d already watched his face change once today.

“I want you to come with me.”

The impossibility of return gave way. He was one of many, but he wanted to take her home. The aching that had sat at her center since she’d seen him and the imagined Vanessa and the real child grew into a throb. He was taking her home.
CHAPTER 8

It was the first time that Cecilia had seen her like that. She had witnessed what had seemed a preoccupation; a stage that Vi was going through. Cecilia had thought it was simply a developmental reenactment performed by every teenage girl; a copy of what comes before. She would catch Vi standing in front of the mirror staring at her bare breasts. It wasn’t as if she was fascinated by the size and shape of them. It was more of a clinical examination. Sometimes she would snatch glimpses of Vi with a ruler or measuring tape; sometimes Cecilia would see her scribbling down notes. It didn’t seem to matter to Vi if the bedroom door was open or not. She was oblivious to anything other than the mounds on her chest. Cecilia couldn’t remember any such fascination before, but maybe that was because there wasn’t so much silence before and without the clutter of words and meaning, Cecilia had become more watchful. She was learning to trust the ocular. She had always believed that the visual was more susceptible to misinterpretation than sound, but this time changed her. This time, as Cecilia walked through the silent halls of her home she was stopped by the vision of her second chance child erasing her breasts. Vi had wrapped her chest so tightly with not her flesh colored bandages that she was having trouble exhaling. Cecilia moved out of the silent hall into the bathroom. She stood behind Vi in the mirror. They were a two-headed woman with four arms and no breasts. Cecilia began to unwrap the binding. A map of small welts recorded Vi’s temporary erasure. The reflection of Vi’s eyes watched helplessly as the bandages fell to the tile floor.

“You are beautiful. Why are you hiding?”
Vi pushed her shoulders up and covered her now bare breasts with her forearms. “I don’t know.”

“Vi. Please. Talk to me.”

The reflection of her daughter pulled away from her, and they were two separate women again. “They will be the end of me, just like they were the end…”

“Of me?” She grabbed Vi’s hunched shoulders and turn to see her face to face. “But I’m still here Vi, and I’m fine.”

“You’re right.” She bent down to pick up the puddle of bandages on the floor. “I don’t know what came over me.”

Cecilia watched her bare back retreat down the hall and into her bedroom, closing the door quietly behind her.
Twisted black iron announced Albany’s town limits. But even without the announcement, she would have known. Vi was entering a city of ghosts. Hers included. She had screamed when she thought she saw the child in the middle of Highway 319. Perry had slammed on the breaks only to realize that there was nothing in the road. She had been mistaken. She had not slept well the night before. She was anxious about meeting the Canons. Perry’s words said that he understood, but his eyes told her the opposite. Her anxiety grew with each mile. There was something that flowed down the highway into Albany that came clear to her as they entered the city limits. It was a place pretending to be at peace, pretending that there was nothing left over from centuries of pain. How could a place where the sons and daughters of torturers and the tortured intermingle not have some sort of overflow? The overflow was there, like a mist after a heavy rain, hovering over manicured Kentucky bluegrass and reproduction British colonial verandas. Even Perry’s face was different here. The half-openness that Vi had become used to had closed completely. By the time Perry pulled his car into the circular driveway, his closed face had prepared her for what she didn’t realize she could prepare for. Even with preparation the feeling of the house unsettled her in a way she had not been unsettled since leaving her own home in Chicago.

“Wait here.” He disappeared behind the double doors, leaving only a small opening.

“Mother. Mother.” The silence that encircled Perry’s cry could be heard through the crack.

A veranda surrounded the house, so Vi followed it. In the distance she could see a woman sitting under a large sycamore and a large black and white striped hat. Just beyond the hat sat a set of perfectly groomed English hedges. A gardener, who was obviously the source of the perfection, trimmed the already perfect to the eye bushes.
“No one is home. They must be at the Club.” Perry called from the now closed doors.

Vi did not offer up what she’d witnessed from the veranda to Perry, instead she returned to Perry in silence, relieved that her Canonization would be deferred a bit longer.

As they pulled out of the circular drive Perry’s eyes found the woman under the sycamore and black and white hat without Vi’s help. But instead of returning, he refocused on the road in front of him. “Would you prefer the scenic route?”

“Show me everything. I want to see where you are from.”

Perry’s everything was limited to anything he could point to from the most direct route to the Club. They arrived too quickly. Vi knew that they had arrived, not because of any sort of sign that marked The Club as The Club, but because of the gates. They were reminiscent of the gates that they’d passed through as they entered Albany. The Club was just as she had imagined it; as anyone who has only caught glimpses of German cars entering secured gates would have imagined it. It was encompassed by white classical hardness; the Parthenon but further south. Marble columns and marble representations of greek gods greeted them as they entered the main building’s rotunda. Vi almost expected to be hailed by toga-donned servants. Perry made an excuse about men only and locating his father that Vi was too preoccupied to hear clearly. She was distracted by the inhabitants of this place that Perry was showing her; the thing that was so vastly different from what she had imagined. White and black both served and were served here side by side. Is this what Booker T. meant? Was this his fist? Were these men and women, who looked as if they had stepped out of a Ralph Lauren catalog, the fingers? Vi was not sure, but as she stood under a reproduction of Icarus and his final flight on the rotunda’s ceiling, she felt her difference. She knew that the servers and the served saw her, because they ignored her so completely. How did they know that she was an interloper? Her external representation was
clearly not the clue. They themselves represented a rainbow of hues. Was her historical
disconnection that obvious? Did her lack show? Perry reappeared out of the door he had gone
through.

“Father is finishing up on the course. And Mother is not here. I must have missed her at the
house.” Before Perry could usher her back through the Grand Hall to the outside, they were seen
by a clump of the served who had just moments before not seen Vi. They moved in a collection
of pastel golf shirts and chinos. The clump approached, and Vi wished herself back into
invisibility, but it did not have any affect. A powder blue piece broke off.

“Canon. What’s up man? I thought you were up at A&M?” His small smile revealed a slight
gap between his bottom teeth.

“I am. Just home for the weekend.”

“Heard you went over. A GNu man now.” The smile widened, and Vi focused on the gap.

Perry’s eyes glazed over and the head of the snake reappeared. The powder blue golf shirt and
the snake moved together into a half hug, and locked the fingers of their right hand in a series of
movements.

Vi didn’t mean to, but she stepped back. The only sign that Perry was aware of her movement
was a momentary hesitation in his release of the powder blue golf shirt.

“And who is this?” The smile and gap closed.

“This is Viola.”

The piece of the clump extended its hand, and Vi took it. It was soft and damp.

“This is your first time to Albany?”
Vi heard the question mark, but saw a declarative sentence. “Yes.” She wanted to rub his sweat off the palm of her hand and down the front of his golf shirt. She wanted to stuff his sweaty-palmed declarative questions into the small space between his teeth.

“I hope our fine city is making you feel at home.”

“Of course.” She was too familiar with unfamiliarity to ever feel anything but at home.

The head of the snake spoke in Perry’s voice. “Well I better get home. Mother will kill me if she knew I was gallivanting all over Albany before she’s had the chance to lay eyes on me.”

Neither one of them spoke until they were on the other side of The Club’s gates. “Did you see your father?”

The head of the snake fell away as quickly as it had grown.

The suddenness frightened Vi. How could anyone change so quickly and seamlessly; even Superman had needed a phone booth. But she had made a promise. If he couldn’t show her all of his faces, what did they have? There could be nothing between them.

“Yes.”

“Did you tell him about me?” Had he told him that she had come for him? That she needed his people? She watched his profile for a sign; something to clarify his practiced art of non-language.

“Yes.”

“What did he say?”

“He said to tell mother he would be home late.” His lips tightened across his mouth.

She waited for mouth but he offered nothing. “What about your sister?”

“Diana?”

“Was she at the Club?”
“Diana?” A crooked smile appeared on his face. “The Club is not a place she visits voluntarily.” He turned and looked at Vi, as if something had just occurred to him. “I need a drink.”

“Do you remember what happened the last time I had a drink?”

“Yes. You saved me. I know a place. It’s on the other side. The Brief Encounter. Would you like to go?”

He seemed almost satisfied in that moment, and Vi wanted to delay the return to the Canon house as long as she could. “To the encounter.”

The crooked smile remained as he turned the car around and headed down a lonely two-lane highway. It was a manmade landing strip, awkwardly sprouting from the center of overgrown oak trees. The gravel crunched under the tires as Perry parked under a canopy of pine trees. Soft lights twinkled on the sagging overhang. A clumsily painted sign arched across the black door “The Brief Encounter”.

The bartender could have been forty or sixty. Missing teeth and smooth brown skin gave conflicting clues. “Hey Schoolboy, what can I get you?”

“A rum and coke.”

“I ain’t gone get in no trouble serving y’all?” The man’s eyes focused on Vi’s face.

“The only trouble you’ll have is if you don’t serve us.” Perry’s voice held a smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

The crowd parted as Perry moved through them with the drinks. Pats on the back and greeting from every side of the room suggested a camaraderie that was not fully realized. The contact preceded a taking instead of giving, as if Perry’s status would somehow rub off. If he had achieved it as easily as a trick of birth, why couldn’t it be transferred as easily as a pat on the
back; each was out of the control of man; each a trick of the universe. Perry sat her down at a table in the back, even from the perimeter they remained at the center of the Encounter. They were interlopers slumming. Though they sat at a table for four, no one ventured to claim the only two empty seats in the packed club, or approach their table. Their drinks seemed to refill themselves.

The music was too loud for conversation, and Vi suspected it was why Perry liked this place. He closed his eyes and felt the bass. He was a warrior being called to war by the bass of the drums. But who was he fighting?

Vi smelled her first. Juicy Couture filled her nostrils. She looked like one of those girls plucked from prepubescent wet dreams. Everything about her suggested multiple ejaculations. The girl moved and the Encounter moved. She leaned into the empty space next to Perry.

“Baby Boy. Didi didn’t tell me you were home?”

Vi couldn’t stop looking at the girl’s breasts. They were presented in a blouse that left more displayed than not. They looked like breasts built to feed a nation.

Perry did not smile, but his eyes followed Vi’s. “Just got here. Looking good as usual.”

“Thanks.” She pulled out the seat in front of Perry and leaned into him, exposing more of her nation building chest. “Buy me a drink?”

“Of course. Just tell A.D. you’re on my tab. Like always.” Perry leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes as the bass rose.

Without Perry’s gaze, the girl shrank. Even her breasts appeared smaller. She adjusted the front of her blouse to account for the shrinkage and headed back in the direction she’d come from. Vi watched her until she disappeared into the pulsating crowd. The rum and cokes, the rising bass, mixed with the girl’s Juicy Couture was making Vi’s head spin.
She hit Perry on his shoulder and mouthed the words more than she spoke them. “Where’s the ladies room?”

Perry pointed to a dark corner, before closing his eyes and returning to the drums.

There was no signage on the restroom to indicate who could and who could not enter, so Vi pushed through the door with the assuredness of one without choice. The inside of the restroom was consistent with the inside of the club. Plum peeling walls and cracked white and black tiles suggested the Brief Encounter’s longevity. There were only two stalls. Her stomach churned. She swung the door of the first stall open, but was stopped from proceeding by what had been discarded by a less than courteous previous visitor floating in the tank. The sight and smell pushed the smells and sights of her previous interaction closer to the surface. The door in the second stall swung open easy until it didn’t. It was stopped from completely acquiescence by the heel of a silver platform shoe. The shoe was on a foot that was attached to a leg that was supported by a knee that was pressed against the dirty black and white cracked tile. Vi’s hand covered her mouth. She wasn’t sure if it was from shock or to catch what was rising from her middle like a speeding train.

“What the fuck.” It had come from the man leaned up against the stall wall, cradling the girl’s head at the center of his thighs. His eyes bounced back and forth from Vi and the bobbing head girl, then rolled up into his eye lids. His body shook from the inside out, which must have eased the grip he had on the bobbing head, because it turned. The bobbing head was replaced by a face that was on the pretty side of plain. Plum passion lipstick was smeared from the bottom of her nose to her top lip. Quickly drying semen leaked from the corner of her mouth. Vi prepared herself to be cussed out, but instead the smeared, semen-encrusted lips spread, exposing two rows of perfect white teeth. “Learn anything?”
The rum and perfume were unwilling to wait any longer. Vi was just able to make it into the unflushed stall. When she attempted to flush, she realized that the previous visitor was not rude, but had been abandoned by the promise of working plumbing. The mixture of discarded wastes began to rise, and Vi backed out of the stall. She managed to splash cold water on her face and exit just as what she had left behind began to seep into the lovers’ stall. She hoped the girl had made it off her knees.

Perry was still seated alone. She leaned into his ear. “I’m ready to go.”

He pulled away from her briefly, before standing up. The stink of the restroom and her contribution had obviously followed her. He moved quickly through the Encounter, as if he’d anticipated her need to flee.

They were back on the main road before Vi spoke. “Why did we go there?”

“I thought you would have a good time.”

“No you didn’t. Who was that girl?”

“That was someone I used to see.”

“She was not what I expected.”

“She is what they expect.” His eyes referenced the landscape they were creeping through.

“This is where I’m from.”

“That’s where you’re from?” But you are one of seven.

His answer was a turn through another gate. They parked in silence and darkness.

Footsteps echoed through the foyer. It took a moment for Vi to realize that the footsteps belonged to them. Vi followed Perry as they passed portrait after portrait.
Perry noticed her slowed steps. “My sister likes to call it Hangman Hall. Further proof of our backwardness. Once you die, you come here to hang.”

“All of you.”

He shook his head. “Only the carriers of the name.”

“No mothers?”

He shook his head again.

Was that it? The reason she was in pieces. She had no Hangman Hall; no line of dead patriarchs to cover the absence; no thing to hide the pain behind. Her fragmentation was the reason for it all. She was almost sure of it. The baby was the sign. She understood. She knew if she could have Perry than the sign would leave. She would no longer be a piece instead of a part.

Perry placed his index fingers against is lips. “Mother is probably sleeping. I’ll take you to my room.”

Vi followed. The house was smaller than she’d imagined, but the emptiness made it feel larger. For a moment Vi imagined how a real estate ad might mark the lack. “And this colonial is an echo of emptiness, plenty of room for the young family. Plenty of hidden corners and closet space for your own skeletons. She laughed and Perry turned momentarily contemplating the source, before opening a door and signaling her to go through it. Vi walked past Perry into Perry’s past. It was a room filled with perfectly staged artifacts. Each item looked as if each one had been picked to reflect who he was supposed to be. The crossed oars over the bed. The leather bound copy of Tom Sawyer on the desk. Even the deep blue color on the wall was a manipulation. “How did you?”

“Breathe?” They smiled. “I was like Moby.” He pointed to a realistic rendering of Ahab and the white on the wall. “I got used to holding my breath.”
Vi sat on the compass covered bed. “Why do you want to come back?”

He shrugged. “Is school different? At least this I know.” He touched the whale on the wall. “Are you hungry?”

“No.” Vi was too unsettled. Her stomach was still upset. She must first get her footing here in this house and settle her stomach.

His faced opened up for a moment. He understood. “I’ll get you some club soda. The bathroom is across the hall.” He left her then, alone in his ancestral room. She laid down in Perry’s bed, and it instantly started to spin. She placed one leg out of the bed. Balance. The bed stopped spinning, and she was able to close her eyes.

Buzzing woke her. The buzzing was behind her, but outside of her visual domain. But it was close enough to cause goose bumps on the back of her neck. Each time she turned to visually define the sound and feeling, it turned with her. Then the room changed into a hallway. Closed doors lined both walls. The buzzing behind her pushed her forward. She tried each door in the order of their appearance until one gave way. It opened to a room and mirror, and she was finally able to visually capture the sound behind her. The source of the buzzing and catalyst for her movement was a pair of wings. Not the brilliantly feather testaments to God’s strength that she had seen recorded over and over again, but small fat fluttering atrocities growing from the center of her shoulder blades. The mirrors multiplied their freakishness. Vi stood frozen unable to hide from the truth that reflected itself back to her from multiple viewpoints. Suddenly one question climbed above all the others. Could she fly? A window appeared in the middle of one of the mirrored walls. She climbed up into the window well. She looked up and Perry was reflected in the mirror above her. She looked down and the child’s reflection was at feet. Behind her copies of copies of the fluttering at her back bounced back toward her. She jumped.
“Are you okay?” A face appeared above her, shaking her awake.

Vi sat up in Perry’s past. The mirrors were gone. The sunlight cascading through the window shone only Ahab’s testimony reflected from the walls. She reached over her shoulder. The wings were only imagined. She was in Albany. This was Perry’s room. This was Perry’s bed.

“I’m fine. A bad dream. Where’s Perry?”

“Perry’s gone.”

Vi did not hide the panic that flashed across her face.

“Don’t worry. He’s coming back. He had a suspicion that you might wake up with a headache, so he went to the drugstore. He’ll be back shortly. Can I feed you?” Her smile was brilliant. She had seen it before, but less open. It was Perry’s smile.

“I’m Diana, Perry’s sister.”

“I’m Vi.”

She smiled again. “I’ll let you get dressed. Come down stairs, and we’ll have some brunch.”

She was starving. She didn’t realize how hungry she was until she found the kitchen. A small woman barely looked up at her from a seat at the counter. Vi’s hello was acknowledged with a nod toward the patio doors. Vi went through the doors and found Diana sitting out on the veranda at a table that was covered with enough food to feed a family of ten. Diana didn’t notice Vi’s initial approach. Her eyes were focused on the now empty spot where Vi had seen the woman with the black and white hat the evening before.

“Diana.”

She looked up from her contemplation and nodded toward a wicker chair across from her.

Vi sat down. Diana was looking at her, but seemed to be thinking about something else. “So Vi, what does your father do?”
“Dead.” Vi didn’t know why she said it. It had been the first time the idea had found air even though she had wondered over the years. Saying it made so much more a reality, even if it wasn’t true.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Your mother? What does she do?”

“She gets into her car, and goes to a tall building and comes back 8 hours later.”

“Sounds normal. How does it feel to be normal?”

Vi wanted to laugh out loud. “You are asking the wrong person.”

Diana waved her hand over the feast. “Please help yourself.”

Vi filled a plate with sliced pineapples and honeydew melon.

Diana’s eyes narrowed as she watched Vi bite into the pineapple. “Who are you?” The sweetness that had covered her like a blanket fell.

Vi dropped the pineapple, knowing only one way to answer. “I’m Viola Moon.”

“Your people. Who are your people?”

“I have none.” Vi thought she could hear the fluttering of inadequate wings, but it was only her imagination.

Diana smiled with lips covered in a glossy plum passion. “Finally the favored son rebels. It’s easier than my method, but I’m sure infinitely less fun.”

Vi wanted comprehension to abandon her. She had been terrified since they had crossed Georgia state lines that the signs would sever from the signifier, but in that instant, Vi wished for meaninglessness. She pushed the plate of acidic fruit back toward the center of the table. “I’m going to try to find something to settle my stomach.”

Diana pulled the blanket back up, stood up, and laced her arm through Vi’s as she guided her back toward the kitchen. “Maybe we can get Li to whip up some of her special sweet tea. She
makes the best tea in Albany?” Diana moved her hair from her face and leaned into Vi’s ear.

“Not really. She makes it from the Lipton mix, but that’s what we do in here. Brag on our domestic’s domestic ability. Be it real or imagined.” She smelled like eucalyptus.

Vi prayed that the blanket would stay up. She did not have the strength to watch it fall again. They stepped back into the kitchen and the woman who had not moved from the huge counter island.

“She doesn’t speak very good English. Mother prefers it. Says she doesn’t have to worry about her gossiping about what goes on here. Isn’t that right Li?”

In response to her name, Li smiled again and nodded affirmation before returning to the latest issue of O magazine.

Diana poured Vi a glass of Li and Lipton’s sweet tea and motioned for her to sit in the chair across from her. Diana wasn’t beautiful, not in the since of perfect symmetry. But she was well-practiced. She knew how the light hit her face. She understood the hairstyle that would most complement her facial structure. Her makeup was impeccably applied. Her sundress was cut to perfection to expose what worked and hide what did not. She hid her non-beauty well.

Footfalls in the foyer interrupted Vi’s contemplation. She hoped it was Perry. Her head was pounding and she needed to breathe.

“Diana, Is that you? Can you bring your overheated father a tall glass of Li’s infamous sweet tea?”

“Daddy come in here. There’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

Vi’s eyes were focused on connecting the voice with a body when something in Diana’s voice made Vi turn back toward her. The brilliance had dropped away like a stripper’s g-string. Diana was exposed, and Vi saw the need that she had hidden on the verandah. The voice and the
body joined and the Sixth stood in front of her. He was smaller than she’d imagined, but he would have had to be to fit into the door. From Perry’s words she had built a giant, but this man disappointed. He was small, smaller than Perry, but his face revealed nothing. While Perry had learned to bluff on occasion, the Sixth had no tell. He extended his hand toward her.

“Daddy this is Perry’s girlfriend, Viola?”

“Moon.” If Vi had not been watching as intently as she always did, she would have never seen it. It was a hesitation, not more than a millisecond. His left hand moved at the same moment distracting her from the tell. The Sixth was like a practiced magician that kept any meaningful revelation masked by timely diversion.

“Welcome Viola Moon. It is a pleasure to meet you. Where is Perry?”

“Viola wasn’t feel well. So he went to the drugstore for aspirin.”

The Sixth turned toward Vi. It was like all of his movements, uninformative. “I hope you are feeling better.”

Vi nodded and smiled in silence, remembering his need for few words.

“Your mother?”

Diana nodded toward the stairs.

“Well no need to disturb her.” He turned back toward Vi, and she struggled to locate Perry is face and mannerism. “Apologies for our ragtag welcome, Viola, but I’m afraid Perry didn’t inform of us that you were accompanying him.” He turned to go. “Diana, make sure Viola is made to feel at home.”

“Of course Daddy.” She smiled her brilliant smile, but it had no effect on the Sixth, because he had already turned and was on his way up the stairs. The smile fell so suddenly as Diana refocused on her that Vi wondered if she’d imagined it. “So how did you meet my dear brother?”
Vi took a sip of the tea. The lack of sugar and overuse of lemon juice stung the roof of her mouth. “At school.”

“That’s apparent, but how? You’re obviously not a sorority girl, or a Sweetheart. How exactly did you find yourself close enough to the inner circle to touch the hem of the chosen one’s garment?”

Vi took another sip of the bitter tea. The second sip was less bitter than the first, or she was simply becoming accustomed to the taste. “We met while he was on line.”

Diana’s perfectly shaped brow rose. “And the plot thickens. Do tell more.”

Vi knew that she should not share the circumstances of her and Perry’s meeting with this gorgeous plain girl, but it was Perry’s face and she needed her to keep pretending to like her. “His chains. They were too heavy. I didn’t think. He was about to fall. So I.”

“Vi?”

She did not think she would ever feel such relief. This time Perry had rescued her. “How are you feeling?” His empty hands were stuffed into his pockets.

“I’m a little off balanced, but Li’s tea has helped to settle my stomach a little.”

“I see you’ve met Diana.”

“Of course.” Vi contemplated Diana with a forced smile.

“Yes, I’ve met Viola. She was just telling me the story of how you met. Something about you not being able to carry your load.”

“Shut up Didi.”

Diana smiled the brilliant smile that the Sixth had ignored at both of them as she exited the kitchen.

Vi climbed the stairs back to Perry’s room, with Perry trailing silently behind her.
“Your sister doesn’t like me.”

“She doesn’t like anyone, not even herself. Don’t worry about her. I want you to meet my mother.”

“No.”

Perry looked as if she’d slapped him.

The look on Perry’s face scared her, but Vi was exhausted. “I don’t want to meet your mother. I want to leave.”

“You’ve been here a day. I thought you wanted to know me.”

“This is who you pretend to be.”

He reached out for her. The same way he’d reached out for her in the library. It was the grasp of a sinner seeking redemption.

Vi pushed him away. “No.” She wasn’t even sure she’d said it aloud, but she must have, because Perry retreated instantly, closing the door behind him. She listened as his footsteps down the stairs faded into nothing. He was always already leaving her behind. Was he the one? Was he strong enough? Was his legacy enough? The child had remained invisible since that first time. Was her invisibility a sign that Canonization was required to save her? Vi followed her questions into Hangman’s Hall. She traced Perry’s face in the faces of his ancestor. Perry had the First’s forehead. His nose was a copy of both the Third and the Fifth. The cleft in his chin belonged to the Second. What about his hands? All of the Canons’ images were cut off from their hands. The frames stopped at their chests. Where had Perry inherited his rough and needy hands? She tried to recall the Sixth’s hand shake, but she couldn’t remember. Sound interrupted her failed rememory. Was it the child? Had she hoped prematurely? She turned and Diana stepped out of
the shadow. Vi searched her face for signs of the blanket of sweetness, but she had discarded it completely. There was no pretense in her manner.

“Impressed?”

“Of course. This.” Vi waved at the two dimensional record of Canon ancestry. “This is a gift.”

“Of course you think so. You have no people. Why do you think Mr. Perrion Canon the seventh has chosen you, over all those peopled beauty queens over at the University?”

It had been a question that Vi had silently asked herself too many times. She answered the girl in the same way she had answered herself each of those times. She shrugged. She could not define what was indefinable, at least with words this girl would understand. Perry needed her, just as much as she needed him. It had been a miracle that they had found each other, or maybe their need was like a beacon in the mist. She did not know, but even if she did, she would not tell this girl.

“I hope you don’t think he loves you. For people like us, love is not an influence. My mother loves the gardener, but she will never leave this for him.”

Vi remembered the shared space between the woman under the hat and the gardener trimming nothing. “Money doesn’t matter to me.”

“Money. The money is mother’s.” Diana walked closer to Vi. She was as tall and lean as Perry. It was impossible to hear her and not hear him. “He really hasn’t told you anything. Come here peopleless girl.” She pointed at the dead Canon men. “Look at these faces. This is the farce we live for.”

“It’s a blessing to know your people.”
Diana laughed. “This is as much of a lie as my virtue, and Perry’s strength of character. He is weak, and I’m a whore. Don’t you get it? It is all a lie, but it only works if we all continue to tell it. They,” she pointed to the dead faces on the wall, “want to be different. They don’t want to be niggers. Whores and cowards, but niggers never.” She turned toward Vi. “You, peopleless girl, are a nigger.” She walked away then, and left Vi alone in a hall lined with dead Canons.

Vi walked through the from France doors, making sure to head in the direction opposite the over-manicured shrubs. Perry’s abandonment; Diana’s words; the child’s absence and presence. It kept her from seeing what was always already in front of her, and she tumbled.

“Are you hurt?”

Vi shook her head and shook the tears loose that she had been holding in since her arrival in Albany.

Arms encircled her, and she leaned into two breasts that seemed built to hold her up. The noises coming from her were not intelligible, but the meaning was clear. They were meant to soothe Vi, and the softness covering this mother heart and the cooing sounds coming from even deeper inside of her, did just that.

She wiped the snot from her nose. “You must be Mrs. Canon.”

“Please call me Cleo. You must be the one that Perry has told me so much about.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to disturb you. I just needed to take a walk.”

She laughed, and it was like church bells ringing, both beautiful and ominous. “I’ve taken many such walks myself. Who was the source of your need? Please don’t let it be my dear Perry? Oh yes. My sweet Diana.” She walked over to her chair and picked up a half-filled teacup. “She simply has not learned how to survive here. Don’t let the manicured shrubs and sweet tea fool
“you. It takes advanced survival skills to live the way we do.” She started walking back toward the house. “Come child. Li should be opening some cans and adding water to something in preparation for supper by now. We eat promptly at three.”

Vi had no idea how the Canons’ dressed for supper, and Perry was nowhere in sight to advise her, so she chose the green dress that she had worn to her work-study interview. When she entered the dining room, she realized that the dress was 2 and 0. Both Cleo and Diana sat in pastel tank tops and shorts. Perry was still dressed in the jeans and t-shirt he’d had on earlier. She tried to back out before they saw her, but Diana caught her.

“Vi, what a pretty dress. Green is definitely your color. Come, sit next to me.”

This Diana was back. Vi wanted to refuse, but knew her slight would appear unjustified to Cleo and Perry. As soon as she took the proffered seat from Diana, Li began to place dinner on the table. Cleo had not exaggerated in regard to Li’s cooking skills. The chicken was the kind busy working mothers picked up from the grocery deli after they’d slow-cooked it into a rubbery fibrous effigy of its former self. The watery mashed potatoes were topped with an even runnier gravy. Diana stared at her plate as if her gaze could somehow transform into something edible.

Vi looked at the empty chair across from Cleo. “Aren’t we going to wait for Mr. Canon?”

“If Daddy is smart, he will have eaten at the Club.” Diana poured the potatoes onto her plate. “Why exactly did Daddy pay to send Li to that cooking class last winter? At what point will we be seeing any of those recipes?”

“It takes time dear. It all takes time.” Cleo seemed to be searching for something on the table. “Li, my ice tea.”

When the filled-to-the-brim crystal arrived, Cleo lifted the glass to her lips as if she had not tasted anything that refreshing in days.
Though she addressed Cleo, Diana’s eyes never left Vi’s face. “Just think Mother. If Perry and Viola got married, we would be sisters. I’ve always wanted a sister. Someone to share all those unshareable things with. Perry was always as so closed and quiet and well a boy. But you, you are a real girl aren’t you? We could be like sisters, couldn’t we Vi.” Diana let her fork plop into her potatoes.

Vi had experienced Diana’s false warmness before and would not be as easily deceived this time. Vi looked toward Perry’s face, but it was if he had found a puzzle that needed to be solved in his mashed potatoes. She was alone.

Cleo put her glass down. “It’s a shame that you’ve kept this child hidden from us so long Perry. Why didn’t you tell me that you had a girlfriend?”

Perry shrugged and went back to moving his food around the plate.

Cleo turned toward Vi. “Do you have brothers or sisters?”

“No. It’s just me and my mom.”

The warmth traveled to Diana’s lovely, plain face. “Are you one of those urban stories? Single working mother, struggling to survive. I bet you’re the first in your family to go to college. Isn’t that wonderful mother. Vi is such a credit to the race. Do you live in one of those projects that Chicago is so famous for? You know big city poverty is so much more romantic than rural poverty. The country is no shoes or running water, but Chicago. Chicago is gang wars and crack. You should be a writer Vi. You really must write. You must be an example of how one lifts oneself up by one’s bootstraps. You must write it down, so those you left behind will know that poverty is a choice, isn’t it? Don’t you think mommy? Wouldn’t that be wonderful mommy?”

There was sadness written across Cleo’s face that the overflowing crystal could not erase. She sipped her tea, and avoided Vi’s eyes.
Vi realized that like Perry, Cleo could not help her. Neither was strong enough to help themselves. She wished for Cecilia Before’s words. Cecilia would not allow this beautiful plain girl to talk to her like this. She tried to recall, but only visions of Cecilia After’s sliced into body appeared. Vi was truly alone. “Maybe I will write it all down, but right now I think I’m going to excuse myself.” Vi pushed herself back from the table of Canons’ in more pieces that she’d sat down.

Vi had packed most of her things, by the time Perry came into his room. “What’s wrong?”

“You keep leaving me alone.”

“I was right there.”

She leaned against Moby Dick. “I want to go home.”

“Home?”

“Back to school.”

“That’s not your home.”

“Than what is. Chicago?”

“Mother does not want you to leave. Diana is mean. She always has been and always will be. You just have to ignore her.”

“Perry. Please. Take me home.”

Perry’s mouth opened and closed, swallowing sound and meaning. He walked out of the room, but this time VI did not hear echos of his footsteps descending the staircase.

She followed Perry’s silence down the stairs and placed her bag by the front door. He carried her bags to the car without words. Mrs. Canon stood alone on the outside of the door.

“Goodbye Mrs. Canon. Thank you for welcoming me into your home.”
“I wish you could stay. Perry told me that you have a big exam to study for on Monday.” She squeezed Vi’s shoulder with both hands.

Vi wanted to fall into her arms, and rest her head where she could no longer rest it on Cecilia. But this was neither Cecilia Before or After. Cleo stood unsteadily in front of Vi. She had no resting place for her own children.

“Are you sure you won’t reconsider. I know Diana is a handful.”

“It’s not that.”

Cleo reached down for the never empty crystal, and the child suddenly appeared at her feet.

“Stop!” Vi backed away.

Cleo knocked over the glass, and it shattered against the worn wooden floorboard. The smell of alcohol encompassed them both. Unveiled Cleo stepped back from Vi. “What ghosts are chasing you child?”

The child was all sight and sound, sitting in front of her in the flesh. Was this a sign? If so, what did it signify? “Before out in the garden you said Perry had mentioned me, but at dinner you reprimanded him for keeping me a secret.”

“Li! Li!” Cleo’s hands were shaking, so she pressed them against the sides of her dress to steady them. “No, I said you were the one that Perry has told me so much about. Perry mentions, pledging and class, and debutantes and graduate school. But he has told me about you in the in between. I could hear you in his empty spaces.” She searched through the open door for someone to rescue her. “Li, I need you.”

Diana’s voice rang out from the other side of the door. “Is everything okay?”

“I’m afraid I’ve dropped my tea. Please tell Li I’ve made a mess.”
Vi did not wait for Li, or Diana, or the hungry child to gain footing. She descended the porch and climbed into the car next to Perry.

As they pulled away, Cleo and Diana looked like ghosts rocking on a verandah that only existed in the imaginations of those with short memories. But they were Perry’s ghosts, not hers. The baby was no longer with them. Ghosts were best left in the dark. On the way back the child followed her. Was she admonishing her for her failure, or applauding her escape? Whichever it was, Vi still tried to comfort her, but could not find the words, so she tried with sound. If Perry noticed the soft cooing noises she made the entire way down hwy 319, he made no comment. Ronnie was wrong. Ancestors could not be borrowed. Legacies could not be traded like overused goods at the Swaporama. It was all as simple as biology. The blood could not be borrowed. When they reached campus, Vi had no choice but to tell Perry the truth.

“There is nothing between us.” She closed the car door firmly behind her before he could respond. If he did say something, Vi could not hear him over the silent screams of her legacy, who was following her into Tubman’s Tower D.
CHAPTER 10

The sounds were the same, but there was a silence that stood out underneath the buzz and hum of the cicadas. The cicadas should have been comforting; a memoriam to the arrival of her second chance. But the walk from the garage to the side door was laborious. They were like swarming honeybees in search of their queen. The side door fell open with no effort, and the panic of the swarming beetles subsided. But as she made her way through the kitchen the panic began to rise anew. The buzzing was now muted by the closed door, but there was a buzzing inside.

“Vi.” The sound of her voice was absorbed into the soft cushions of the living room sofa and thick shag carpeting underfoot. “Vi.” She said it louder, loud enough for Vi to hear her from anywhere in the raised ranch. Vi’s bedroom door was closed. A now familiar occurrence in the After. She pushed the door open, but the room was empty. She backtracked to the closed bathroom door. She pushed the bathroom door opened. Vi was sitting in the tub with her eyes closed. She looked as if she was sleeping, except for the blood that was covering her chest. Without thinking, Cecilia picked up a wash cloth and began to wiped the blood way, searching for the source. She could feel Vi’s strong heart beating beneath her steady hand. When she had washed enough of Vi’s blood away, she realized that Vi had not completed her task. Vi was simply unconscious, not lost forever. She had carved a ragged question mark around her right breast. The pain had probably saved her.

“Vi wake up. Please. Wake up.” Cecilia tried to lift her second chance child, but she was too heavy. She could not do it alone. “Vi, sweetie, you have to wake up. I can’t lift you on my own. I need you. Please wake up.”
Her eyes fluttered before flying open. They were filled with a clarity that Cecilia had not
seen in Vi’s eyes since she was six, and had demanded to know about her father. Vi looked
down at her chest and the bloody washcloth. “I’m not finished. I have to finish. Cecilia.
Please, help me finish.”

Cecilia covered Vi’s mouth. “You are finished. You are not cutting anything. If I had a
spare hand, I would cut a switch and beat you where you lay. Hold the cloth.”

Vi did not move.

In her best don’t test me child voice, Cecilia repeated the command. “Hold the cloth.”

Vi’s hand quickly covered Cecilia’s.

“Don’t move.” Cecilia backed out of the room, praying that her child’s fear of her was
greater than her fear of an imagined cancer. She dialed 911 and instructed the cool-voiced
woman on the other end of her location and the nature of the emergency.
“Ms. Moon. It seems as if your associate is less than on time this afternoon. Please distribute the list today.” The list sat on his forward desk next to an worn cloth-covered book.

It appeared forgotten. Vi touched the cover. “The children of Hercules?”

“The Children of Herakles. It is the story of both great sacrifice and great fear. A greek tragedy.” Dr. Locke quickly moved it from the top of the desk

“Like Sophocles’ Oedipus.”

The lines of Dr. Locke’s face softened. “Yes. But this one is authored by my namesake, Euripides. In order to prevent the children of his enemy from seeking revenge in the name of their father, Eurystheus tries to kill them, but King Demophon is willing to risk war to save them.” Dr. Locke sat back in his chair. “That’s what we do at this institution. We attempt to erase what came before.”

“Is that even possible? To erase before.”

“Of course not. But somehow we think if we don’t agree with it, if it doesn’t bolster our own worldview, that somehow we have the right to erase it. In the 60’s the focus was on the classics, in the 70’s it changed to black power, in the 80’s we looked back to Africa. And with each wave of the new, everything old ended up on the permanent storage list. Each one, incinerate one.”

“But that’s not right. How can we let them destroy so much? Once it’s gone it’s…”

“Irretrievable. Ms. Moon can you imagine the texts we have lost? The truths that will remain unrecovered until they are reinvented as brand new.” He shook his head in her direction. “No you can’t, can you? Your world is too small to understand such lost.”

“I know lost.”
“May be you do.” He picked up Herekles Children and walked to the back of the warehouse. He pushed aside an empty shelf to reveal a locked door. He unlocked the door to reveal a smaller version of the room they had just left. The walls were lined with shelves which were lined with carefully cataloged books. “I protect them, even in the midst of threats of war. I will not let them be the victims of revenge and fear. I protect them and catalogue them. I do it because I must. There is no one else to do it. Don’t get me wrong Ms. Moon. This is a dangerous endeavor. Eurystheus has a long and deadly reach, but they are worth war, aren’t they? And when the world changes again, they will thank me for saving them from themselves.”

Vi didn’t know what to say or how to react. Dr. Locke had let her in. He had shown her his greatest endeavor. She understood now that the past was too powerful to forget. Her father’s face had to be recovered. She was not ready to place it on the permanent storage list.

As he locked the door, and replaced the bookshelf, he pressed his index finger across his lips. “Remember Ms. Moon. Eurystheus.”

Vi nodded in silence as they walked back to the Dr. Locke’s desk, and she picked up the list. “Are there any on here that you want me to bring directly to you?”

Locke looked down at the list in her hand and seemed surprised by the whiteness of the page. “Hold on Ms. Moon. I seem to have given you one of the administrative copies. I’ll take that one.” He reached out from the safety of in between. She placed the clean list on his desk, and he handed her a much redder replacement. “Thank you Ms. Moon.”

Tunisia burst through the Attic doors still in motion. “Sorry I’m late. My roommate —”

Dr. Locke waved her excuse away with his hand. “You almost missed Ms. Moon. She has the control sheet for the day.”
And that quickly her Dr. Locke, the one that had welcomed her into his world, disappeared back into himself. Tunisia’s presence had shifted the room. While Locke was still focused on Tunisia, Vi picked up the clean list from Locke’s desk.

Tunisia frowned. “I thought you were handing out the lists from now on.”

He dismissed them both without words and began to rummage through the ledger again.

Vi handed Tunisia the unrevised sheet, and Tunisia snatched it out of hand without making eye contact. The sheet had been barely touched by Locke’s sword. Would she be suspicious of such an uncontrolled control sheet?

“Where you working today? The 4th floor?” Tunisia’s bared tooth smile bore no warmth.

“No I have Geography today.” Vi did not make eye contact. She pushed her cart into the freight elevator.

“Just checking, so I know what spots to avoid, Nasty girl.” Tunisia exited the elevator on the 1st floor.

Any hesitation Vi had felt at ceasing the opportunity to redistribute the Attic’s cosmic balance, disappeared. She pushed her cart out onto the 4th floor. She was both alone and not.

Though the embodiment of the child was not there, the promise of her never left. The ache that her presence initiated around Vi’s heart was actually comforting. Vi had found comfort in pain.

That is what Cecilia Before would have called making lemonade out of lemons. She pushed the cart through American History three times. She had to make sure that she had not missed any. She had to recover what she could. She couldn’t let E Moon burn in the incinerator of history.

She couldn’t let the child starve. Locke’s secret had been a reiteration of what she had already known. It was funny how many Moons she was able to find once she began to look for them. They were everywhere. Here was a Moon at the center of the Civil War, another appeared in the
midst of Manifest Destiny. She circled the Social Sciences, stacking every copy of Moon’s *Subjects and Citizens* neatly next to *The Last Man on the Moon*. She was so involved with her search that she didn’t hear Tunisia until it was too late.

“What’s all that on you cart?”

This girl had the timing of Cristoffa Corombo. She was always in the wrong place at the right time. “Books.”

“Stop tripping Chicago. We both know that I got Social Science today.”

“These? They were misplaced. I’m reshelving them.”

“That’s not your job.”

“I know, but our lists are so light lately. I figured reshelving is better than hanging out with Locke until the end of my shift.” Vi pushed her cart toward the freight elevator, hoping to convince Tunisia of her innocence through action. “I’m going down to Geography now.”

Tunisia’s expression said that she did not believe her. “You smell that?”

Vi paused from her performance to witness Tunisia’s.

“Smell like fish.” Tunisia turned her nose up in Vi’s direction and began waving her hand in front of her face. “Just so you know, next time I see unauthorized pulls on your cart, I’m telling Locke.” As if to strengthen her threat Tunisia didn’t push her cart away until Vi was safely on the freight elevator headed down to Geography.

She had been careless. She had to be more careful. Her collection would take time. Locke had probably been working on his for years. But he didn’t have to worry about a Tunisia. The throbbing around her heart echoed the need to continue. Once Tunisia had disappeared into the stacks, Vi was able to retrieve the Moons that she had pretended to put back. This time she was
more careful. She made sure that her picks could not be seen on her cart without real effort. Even in her care, she didn’t see him, until he wanted her to. Had he always been there?

“Do you hear me?” He took a step forward. “Can you hear me? When I see you, it’s like I’m invisible to you.” He took another step forward, placing his foot in front of the cart.

“Perry. I need time.”

“I took you home. You met my family. You said that there would never be anything between us. I want it back the way it was. Without words.” He grabbed both of her arms and pulled her closer.

She yanked herself away from him. “I don’t want silence. I don’t want —” She looked past him to the books on the shelf behind him. Was that another E. Moon?

“But you were willing to carry it. You grabbed the chain.”

“Perry I don’t think I can. I need time.”

He grabbed her face and pushed his lips against hers. His breath was sour, like something deep inside was rotting. She moved her head away.

“I disgust you now.” He backed away.

“I have to finish.” She stumbled as she pushed the cart away from Perry, but did not look back. Tunisia had been witness to Perry’s possession of her. She had been witness and saw only nastiness. Maybe Tunisia was right. Vi had made wrong an art. Perry had not been an answer. Perry had only been the source of more confusion. He could not offer her a past. He could not feed the child. Maybe she should stop Tunisia. The pop song that Tunisia had turned into a damning mantra rang in her ears. Vi’s list was shorter than it had been the day before, which had been shorter the day before that. Dr. Locke was using the power of the sword more broadly each day. Her control sheet could have been printed on red paper because the white only peeked
through. Tunisia’s had been almost all white. She had time to undo it. First she must secure her Moons. She bagged the unauthorized texts up in garbage can liners and placed them in the dumpster behind the library. But she must have miscalculated because by the time Vi had made it back to the Attic, Tunisia had already arrived, and it was too late to undo her original reaction.

“You thought you were going to beat me cause you gave me the long list. Check me out. Still pulled faster than your ass.” It seemed Tunisia saved her critical thinking skills for after work.

She pushed her cart next to the Locke’s desk.

Vi slid both edited lists on top of Tunisia’s unedited copy.

When Tunisia’s overburdened cart was pushed into Locke’s peripheral vision, his permanent marker stopped moving. “What is this Ms. Johnson?” He looked at the list that Vi had placed back into his inbox and then back at Tunisia’s cart. “You’ve pulled the opposite of my edits. Who are you working for Ms. Johnson?”

“What? Dr. Locke I work for you. I pulled exactly what was on the control sheet like I always do.”

But Dr. Locke wasn’t listening. He was grabbing books from Tunisia’s cart and flinging them onto the ground. “Like you always do. Just like you always do.”

“Dr. Locke I need this job.”

“This is not your first affront to my authority, but it will be your last.”

“Without work study, I’m out of school.”

“You should’ve thought of that before you signed up with those fascists in ACPAC.”

Vi was out the door before she even realized that she had retreated. The scene was too much. The uneven fluttering of wings echoed behind her as she ran up the stairs. She headed toward Hughes’ Hall without conscious thought. She entered like she was not an interloper, taking the
steps to Ronnie’s room two at a time. The hall was empty. The door gave way without resistance.

Ronnie sat on the bed, looking toward the closed window.

“Ronnie. Are you awake? Ronnie?”

“Poor child is that you?”

“Ronnie I need .”

“Check in the bottom dresser on the left.”

With the pills came silence. The wings and the child were silent. Locke’s secret room, Perry’s need, Tunisia’s judgments were all silent. Doubt blossomed into certainty. She didn’t need Perry. Perry was only white noise. Tunisia deserved what she’d gotten. The child?

“I need you to take a ride with me.”

Vi had almost forgotten that Ronnie was in his room. She followed him out of his dorm and to his car, grateful to have a distraction to questions without an answer.

“No wait. Drive.” Ronnie threw the keys in her direction and climbed into the passenger seat.

Blue Thunder roared unevenly under her.

“It’s okay. Just don’t force her.”

Vi pushed the car into third gear. “Where am I taking you?”

“Just take Apalachee Parkway all the way to Capital Circle.”

Vi pushed Blue Thunder down the Parkway, away from the libraries insanity. She drove until the Albertsons and Ramada Inns disappeared into emptied farmland and bigger than life renderings of future subdivisions.

“Turn into the Circle.”

“I hate circles.”

He nodded as if her thoughts were his own.
“Circles always bring you back to the beginning.” Vi did not think to ask what beginning this circle was bringing Ronnie back to.

Ronnie pointed in the direction he wanted her to go. They entered a newly birthed subdivision.

“You never get to move past anything.”

Each home seemed more like the next. Plastic Headstones stuck out from identical patches of green lawn and cute ghosts hung from invisible wires.

“Stop.”

At first she thought he meant her discussion on her circles. Then she realized he meant the car, so she pressed the breaks. Ronnie jumped out of Blue Thunder before she could form her question and disappeared inside of a dark colonial.

Vi was still forming questions when Ronnie returned to the car. At least he was in Ronnie’s body. There was something so different about the face leaning in the window. Vi dismissed her altered view. Hadn’t she just taken two Adderall?

“It’s going to take a little longer than I thought.”

“The thing you’re picking up isn’t here?”

He seemed to be searching for an answer.

The face that was and was not Ronnie’s started to scare her. Did Adderall have the power to change Ronnie? “I’ll wait.”

“No. There’s a little wing spot about a mile up the circle. Just wait there.” He handed her a twenty.
This Ronnie did not want her to wait, and she had no way to ask the other one, so she did as this one asked. Vi went to one of those places that had been really cool the first time it opened, but had lost all of its luster after being thoughtlessly cloned absent original context.

The clone was pretty crowded for a weeknight. Reimagined cobwebs grew from every corner of the restaurant bar combination. Plastic eight-legged apparitions threatened to fall from the ceiling. Vi figured that suburbanites needed a reason to escape their smaller boxes of repetition, so they collected in clumps at bigger boxes of repetition. Even though Vi didn’t know how long it would be before Ronnie would show up, she chose not to wait for a table. The thought of sitting across from an empty chair made something churn inside of her. She sat at the bar. She had to make sure that the hostess was not the bartender, and the bartender was not the waitress. They must have all been chosen based on their indistinguishability. Headshots were probably mandatory with each application. Only faces that could belong to anyone need apply. They were the kind of faces that could successfully blow up Federal buildings or rob banks inside of grocery stores, because no one would ever remember them. They were every man.

The every man tending bar finally noticed her and approached. “Can I get you something?”

She probably should not mix alcohol with the addy she’d already taken, but she wanted to relive the momentary sense of certainty that she was almost sure she’d experienced earlier. “A rum and coke.”

The indistinct bartender didn’t hesitate or ask for I.D. “Do you want anything off the menu?”

She shook her head, and he sat the drink down on the bar in front of her and walked away.

The rum felt warm and cold sliding down her throat. The certainty did not return, but doubt blossomed. She had tried to pretend, and it had not worked. Dr. Gabrielle had told her that it would not. One more thing she’d been right about.
— What do you want from me?
— I want you to be better.
— Do you want me to pretend?
— No pretending won’t work.
— It would get me out of here.
— Until you are out and then what. You’ll just end up right back here, or somewhere
— Somewhere worse?
— That’s not what I was going to say. I was going to say somewhere different. Somewhere less familiar.
— This place is not familiar. I will have no rememory of here after I leave.
— Don’t you mean memory?
— I mean rememory.
— What’s a rememory?
— A memory that wasn’t originally mine.
—
— Hasn’t anyone ever told you a story so many times that it becomes a part of you? And when you retell it it’s like you were there. Sometimes you aren’t even sure?
— Yes. My grandfather used to tell me stories like that.
— That’s rememory, like an inherited memory. My rememory is more familiar than the memories I make. Cecilia says her memories are my inheritance. That each generation must remember the last or
— Or what?
—
— Vi? What happens if you forget?
— I don’t really know. But what I do know is that my memory of this place will die with me.

Through the rum, her clarity cleared, and she saw Dr. Locke sitting in a fake web covered booth in the back. But it couldn’t be. She had just left him in the Attic. Vi was sure of everything and nothing. What would he be doing in this place where buffalos grew tiny wings? But she could see him with her own eyes. Surely she could trust her eyes. They were her father’s. Weren’t those red fingertips waving at the non-descript waitress? She pushed herself off of the stool and moved toward the waving man with the permanently stained hands. The closer she got to the man the more her clarity retreated, and he revealed himself as a stranger.

“Can I help you?”

“Where did the other guy go?”

He shook his head, and smiled. A gold star twinkled on his front tooth. “Sweetie it’s just me. You want to join me?”

“Where’s the other guy with the thick glasses and crazy hair?”

“Sorry sweetie. You’re mistaken.”

“My name is not sweetie.” She turned and reclaimed her seat at the bar. Why was she seeing visions of Locke? Was he her latest resident apparition? Would that be her life, collecting disconnected souls? What was she to do with them once she got them?

“Poor child.” Familiarity interrupted her skewed view. It was Ronnie. He grabbed her by the arm and steered her back toward the bar. “Have you been drinking?”

“Yes.” Vi sat down and signaled to the bartender to bring her another. “Hey you want one for the road?”
“Said the dead girl in the corny after school special.” His head leaned to the side. This was her Ronnie. He was back. “I think I better drive back.”

Vi hugged him. “How did you get here?”

“I got a ride from someone?”

That’s not what she meant. She really wanted to know what had changed him back to himself. She had not even thought of a someone, but of course. People lived in houses on circles. Of course there was a someone. “From who?”

“Why are you all up in my business?” There was a sharpness to his tone that was usually saved for Others.

Vi winced from the cut.

Ronnie’s face and tone softened. “I can’t talk about it. At least not yet. It’s not all my business to share.”

She wanted to ask when had it not being his business ever stopped him, but she just nodded and followed him out of the restaurant.

When they got back to campus, Ronnie pulled into Hughes’s Hall parking lot. He seemed to remember that Vi’s dorm was on the other side of campus only after he put the car in park. She got out of the car anyway. He tried to make her get back in the car, but she told him that she needed to walk to clear her head from the rum. The old Ronnie would never have let her walk across campus alone, but this sometimes new Ronnie was stuck somewhere deep inside of himself.

She walked past Lincoln’s Hall on the way to the dumpster. She couldn’t not look for Perry’s car. It was not there. She tried not to imagine where he was and who was riding next to him, but her imagination had never been so easily disengaged. She walked and visualized. She visualized
him with the girl that was not her. She visualized him at the head of the snake. She visualized him in Albany with crocodile tears falling from his eyes as he bemoaned her lost at Cleo’s feet. She visualized him waiting for her at the foot of Tubman’s Tower D. The books were right where she left them. They were heavy, heavier than when she had pulled them. As she struggled under the weight of her moons, the darkness split in two, and Perry stepped out of her mind’s eye and onto her path.

His face was neither happy or sad. They stood with no words then he lifted his shirt. “It’s healed. Touch it.”

Vi did not want to touch it, but she did. The Gamma interlaced with the Nu stood out against his smooth flesh. She was surprised at how soft it felt against her fingers. It’s violent appearance suggested hardness.

“My father called me the other day.” He let the shirt fall. “He reprimanded me.”

“For what?”

“For you. For bringing you home with me.”

“For me?” Vi had thought she knew this man before she’d ever spoken to him, but the more she listened she realized he was still a stranger to her. “What am I supposed to do with that?”

“I’m trying to understand what’s wrong with you?”

“Everything is wrong with me. Can’t you see that? I’m just different.”

“From them?”

She shook her head. “From you.”

“But we’re different together.”

“Our difference is not enough. We’re not the same.”

Perry’s voice became higher and louder. “But our difference marks us as the same.”
Vi was confused. He was wrong, wasn’t her? It had made sense. It had been clearer, if not clear. Now she wasn’t sure. “I need time.”

He shook his head. “No. If you walk away, you will be invisible to me.”

“I need time.”

“If you won’t see me, I won’t see you. Do you understand Vi? I won’t see you.” He grabbed her upper arms.

She felt so small. Were his hands always that big? “I need time.” She said it more to herself than him. She pulled away from his rough grasp, picked up her moons and disappeared in Tubman’s Tower D.

It seemed like years since they’d sat across from each other. The Day of the Dead had pushed them back together. Each had been so insulated within their own issues that they had had no room for them. Ronnie filled up the empty side of 203D easily.

“So Poorchild have you decided what you are going to be for Halloween?”

“Myself.” She could think of nothing scarier.

He laughed. “Now that was funny. But there must be something that you’ve always wanted to pretend to be. How about Superwoman? No you need someone blacker. What about Kitt’s Catwoman, or the Almighty Isis, the historically correct version.”

Vi could not be a superhero. She couldn’t get through the day without adderall and the night without dreaming about a drowning child. Ronnie was the closet thing to a superhero she had known, accept of course for Cecilia Before. “What about you?”

He flipped through her closet. “Maybe I’ll be you.”
“Why would you want to be me?”

“Let’s switch. Wouldn’t that be wonderful.” He grabbed the green dress from the back of the closet. “You could be me, and I could be you.”

“I can’t be you.” Vi wished she could be Ronnie. He was so sure, even when he wasn’t. She wouldn’t even be able to fake his strength.

He waved her doubts away with his left hand, as he stood behind the dress in front of the mirror. “Of course you can. Remember? I am you and you are me.”

She had not had the heart to tell him that his ancestors had not stood the test of time. That she and he were as separate as Booker T.’s five fingers, so she went along with it. She let him take her green dress, and listened as he coordinated what Ronnie christened the largest act of revolution that A&M had seen in years.

There was a collective gasp when she walked into the classroom. It took Vi a moment to realize exactly who had forced the class toward a joint inhalation. She was pretty, but her beauty grew out of something less picture book. Vi recognized the dress she had worn for her first work study meeting as the girl moved toward her with a look of familiar surprise.

“Where’s your Ronnie suit?” For the first time since the first time she’d met Ronnie, she saw uncertainty flash across his face.

She shrugged. She’d not had the strength to pretend. She should have warned him, but she knew he would have tried to talk her into it. “Sorry”.

The tittering around them only grew louder.

“Always knew Old boy was a faggot.”
Neither one of them turned. The voice didn’t need a face. His words were enough.

Dr. Bennett finally interrupted as the class responded to the voice with unbridled laughter. With barely veiled amusement in his eyes, he motioned the class into silence. “Relax class. It’s just a joke. Let’s get down to business.”

“A joke?” Ronnie whispered it to himself, but his discomfort reverberated through Vi.

“This is the perfect opportunity to readdress our conversation about the willful destruction of the Black Male psyche. Is this,” he gestured toward Ronnie in Vi’s dress, “a sign of the eventual obliteration of the American Black Male?”

Laughter rang out across the room.

“Of course it is.” It was the same voice from before. “They dress us all up. They did it to Flip Wilson first. Then Eddie Murphy and Martin Lawrence. It’s public castration.”

Another voice interrupted. “Damn Man. Are you saying old boy doesn’t have anything swinging under that dress?”

Laughter permeated from every corner of the classroom, including Dr. Bennett.

Ronnie stood up. “What does it mean to be a black man?”

Dr. Bennett looked as if he was unsure Ronnie was talking to him.

“What does it mean to be a black man in America?” His anger began to overflow onto his cheeks.

Dr. Bennett waved Ronnie back into his seat. “A man is a man. A woman is a woman. It is physiology. It’s biological. It’s not up for question. Do I need to review how you tell the difference?” There was a cocky security in his question. The class answered it with laughter.
“I am a man.” He moved to the front of the class. “In a dress or out of one. You know that better than most; don’t you Marcus?” Ronnie reached under Vi’s dress and grabbed his private area. “Or do you need a review?”

The teetering laughter stopped and silence descended on the entire class.

Both of Dr. Bennett’s faces visibly fell. “You need to leave.”

Tears streamed down Ronnie’s face. “I’ve already left.” As Ronnie walked out the door, he paused and turned back toward Vi. Was he waiting for her? She found a spot of smudged chalk on the board. Could she join him? They were not one. They were different. He could take that dress off. Ronnie was strong, and she was not. By the time she was able to look at Ronnie, the space he had been occupying was empty. Dr. Bennett remained in front of the lecture hall with both faces revealed. It was as if all the weight of carrying both selves had aged him a decade in a moment. His transformation reminded her of Cecilia Before and After. This was Dr. Bennett After. Would he be one or two? Would this help him reconcile himself to himself? Vi and the rest of the class simply watched in silence as Dr. Bennett left the classroom.

His dorm room door open easily against the force of her palm. Ronnie was standing in the mirror, surveying himself from all sides. His full smile contradicted his swollen eyes. “I showed him, didn’t I Poorchild? He didn’t see that coming, did he?”

She sat at his desk, afraid to cross the space that was suddenly between them. “Why did you say those things?”

He turned toward her with a look of incredulousness across his face. “Are you blind to everything but your own shit?” He stripped off her dress, and stood in his boxers and eyeliner. “You’re so busy chasing that frat boy all over campus that you can’t see what’s right in front of
your face. That nigger don’t want you. Have you ever been on a real date? Has he introduced you to any of his frat brothers? He sneaks into your dorm room in the middle of the night and fucks you. And you let him. That’s not love. Trust me Vi. I know what I’m talking about.”

“He took me home.”

“What?”

“He took me home.”

“Shit.” Ronnie slid to the floor. “I’ve been calling you Poorchild, and who was the one truly getting fucked.”

She understood now. She understood the old and new Ronnie. She understood the circle. She understood the dress. Dr. Bennett was the someone. He was the one that had almost split Ronnie into two, but he hadn’t. Ronnie was still here. Vi pulled him to his feet. “Get dressed and let’s go.”

“Vi it’s too late.”

He had saved her, and she had let him walk out alone. She would not let him let her leave him again. She pushed and pulled until he was settled in the passenger seat of Blue Thunder. She didn’t know how she found her way back into the middle of nowhere and everywhere, but before she knew it, she was turning up the road onto Ronnie’s family’s land.

“Stop the car.”

“But the red oak is still…”

“Stop I want to see my mother.”

“But Ronnie.”

“Stop the goddamn car Vi.”
Vi pulled Blue Thunder into the front yard of the small clapboard house. The lights were out, and they had passed the last streetlight miles ago. Ronnie leaned over and pushed the pinto’s high-pitched horn without warning. He pushed on the horn again longer and harder. He screamed as he got out of the car and he climbed on top of the car. “Crazy Mary! Your baby’s home.” The pinto’s roof buckled in response to his movements like an aluminum can. “Come on out and see what you made. Mary. I know you’re in there. Come out and face your creation.” The house was still. No movement to indicate if anyone was inside or had heard anything.

Vi finally joined Ronnie on the roof. Blue Thunder groaned under their combined weight.

“What happened?”

“She didn’t want me. She said I was the seed of the devil, and that’s why I was funny acting. I was ten years old when she left me at my Daddy’s house and never came back to get me. Daddy said she wasn’t right in the head and leaving me with him was the best thing she could of done. But I know it’s because I was the way I am. She didn’t want me because I am a freak. The white man’s perfect nigger. Soft, less than a man. She didn’t want me because I’m a fag, a pillow biter, a fudge packer.”

Vi didn’t know what to do. Her world was collapsing around her. How could she save Ronnie from splitting? “Enough of this shit Ronnie. Get your ass in the car.”

He did what she said without argument. They drove to the foot of the red oak. Vi drug Ronnie out of the car, and pushed him to his knees at the bottom of the tree. “What do you want Ronnie? Ask them.”

He shook his head back in forth. Words choked in his throat.

“Ask them! They belong to you. Ask them for what you want. They’ll give it to you. They belong to you.”
He shook his head back and forth, and instead of praying to his ancestors he reached out for her. The first kiss was slow. She pushed his locs back from his eyes, and he touched her breasts, unsure. His hand found the heart across her heart. He looked at her for understanding. She guided his lips to the extra heart. He kissed it before he entered her. It was painful for both of them at first, but soon it wasn’t.

They rode back to her dorm in silence.

“What did you ask them for?”

“To be normal.”

She tried to kiss him when she got out of the car, but he gave her his cheek. It was somewhere before dawn, so she thought that there was no one to witness her walk of shame, but her miscalculation interrupted her contemplation. He wore a t-shirt and sweatpants. His short hair formed an unkempt carpet across the top of his head. His voice broke through the blanket of silence.

“Nothing between us.” He stood in front of her, a wall that would not be ignored.

“Perry.” She tried to walk around him, but he matched every attempt to pass him with his own attempt to keep her there.

“I am Perrion Canon the Seventh.”

“I know. Have you been drinking?”

“You cannot simply walk away from. You prefer that fag to me?” He moved back in disgust.

“You stink.”

“You’re drunk.”

“Did you fuck him? Diana was right. You’re just a nigger.”

“I am what you are. We are the same. Remember.”
“We are not the same. We are from two different places.”

“But we’re both here. Neither one of us is a nigger.”

“You said you would help me carry it. You are a liar and a nigger.” He pushed her down then.

He looked past her face and jammed himself inside of her. Vi looked past him into the sky.

When he pulled himself out of her, the sky was a muddy orange. She prayed for rain to wash away what Perry had just done. But her prayers, as usual, were not answered.
CHAPTER 12

The Centre was sweet. There were magnolias, cattails, and dandelions growing out of the walls. Cecilia let the magnolias lead her to her child. Cecilia didn’t know what she expected to see; Vi in a small bed, too small to see except for tubes and wires coming form her to a machine that kept track of her heart. But the bed was out of a Sears catalog; white with a bedspread buried under magnolias. Vi was not even in it. She was sitting in a chair by the window, looking out over the grounds. She looked like herself, herself before. She wore her favorite jeans and a t-shirt with an angry horse across the front of it. But this was not that kind of hospital. You wore your own clothes here. Vi’s illness could no be cut away.

Vi smiled when she saw her.

Cecilia wanted to hold her, but she wasn’t sure about the rupture that Vi had cut between them. Was it healed? Would a hug hurt? Instead Cecilia sat in the chair that sat opposite Vi in front of the window. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine. I feel really fine.”

“You look like .”

“My self.”

“Yes. You look like yourself.”

“I never stopped being myself.”

“Do you want me to bring anything from home?”

Vi looked up surprised. “Why would you need to do that? I’m leaving here soon.”

“Let’s not rush things Vi. Dr. Gabrielle doesn’t want you to leave before you’re really ready.”
“I was really ready to leave a week before I got here.” Vi kneeled in front of Cecilia. Her eyes glistened with the promise of her pain. “Cecilia I’m fine. I know now. I will not try to hurt myself. I know that I do not have breast cancer. I realize that your cancer is not my cancer.”

“It’s my fault isn’t it? I should have talked about it. I should have paid more attention. I didn’t.” The words were just sound clanking together. Her meaning was untranslatable. Cecilia remembered a time when words were useless between them because understanding was beyond sound. Her surgery had changed that and she had not known how to get it back. She had not tried hard enough, but she didn’t know how to apologize to Vi in a way that she would understand and not twist her words into something that they weren’t. She did not finish her sentence, instead she pulled Vi off her knees and into her lap. She rocked her as hard as she could, Vi leaned against breasts that were no longer there.
CHAPTER 13

The Attic was dark except for the halogen lamp that had, until now, sat unilluminated on top of Dr. Locke’s desk. This was the first time since the first time that Vi had ever felt as if she was actually in a basement. The single light exposed the truth of the damp darkness that surrounded them. The irony of clarity in the midst of darkness was not lost on her. Dr. Locke stabbed the numbers on the phone’s keypad with a ferocity usually saved for his crimson marker. She walked into the small circle of light around his desk just as he was slamming the phone back into its cradle.

“Ms. Moon, good of you to show up. It would be moot for me to question your unexcused tardiness at this juncture.” Stacks of red paper were strewn all across his usually meticulous desk, giving his workspace the appearance of a murder scene.

“Ms. Moon there is no time to waste.” He scooped up a random sampling from the pile.

She hesitated before accepting them from Dr. Locke’s outstretched hand. The singleness of the light made the papers appear blood-soaked.

“We must try to catch up.” His unfocused eyes moved back toward the phone.

“But there are only one or two books on each of these lists. Does Tunisia have the rest?”

Locke caught himself in the midst of his violent interaction with the phone. His head moved in Vi’s direction without actually completing the turn. “Ms. Johnson? Ms. Johnson was not a fit for this position.”

“You fired her?” She had succeeded at something. Her plan had gotten Tunisia fired. She’d acted, even if it was really a reaction. Why didn’t she feel more jubilant?
“You have been promoted to senior library control specialist.” He turned his attention back
toward the phone. “Ms. Moon, I simply don’t have the time for explanations at the present. Has
that printer slowed because of my staffing issues?”

The printer’s clicking and bussing seemed to grow louder and faster as if to punctuate Dr.
Locke’s non-question. “I will take your silence for understanding.” He held the receiver to his
ear, waited and then hung up and repeated the process again. “There is simply not enough time.
Just pull them.”

“Yes Dr. Locke.” Vi pushed her empty cart onto the 3rd floor without even referring to
Locke’s truncated list. The white was almost gone. Tunisia was gone. She was free to do what
she needed to do. She stopped her cart in Astrology. Lately she’d had to leave the earth to find
evidence of her legacy. The irony was not lost on her. There were almost too many Moons to
choose from. The titles all promised a familiarity that she could not remember. She no longer
discriminated regarding authorship. She only needed to see a moon in the title, in a picture,
anywhere. She moved them all onto her cart. As had been happening more and more frequently,
the child’s need interrupted her moon retrieval. She was growing. At first the child’s growth had
assured Vi, made her believe that it was an omen of her ultimate survival, but the growth had not
stopped the child’s hunger. The hunger had grown with her. The child was walking now and
could follow her more adeptly. Vi covered her ears to no avail. The sound reverberated from
inside out. Covered ears only intensified the noise. Students peppered the astrological in small
but consistent clumps. Clumps were worse for Vi. They were grenades with the safety pin,
waiting for someone like Vi to pull it. Humming to drown out the need of the drowning child,
she pushed the cart out of the more populated area. Vi’s contemplation of alternative routes
through the stacks was interrupted by sound layered on sound. Was the baby getting louder,
more insistent? She was trying to tell Vi that she should not have abandoned Perry. That Perry was her only hope for survival. But how could she turn back toward those rough hands? That thing he had twisted into a gnarled mass between her legs? Maybe the child could help do what she didn’t think she was able. She had not believed that she could have sliced herself away from herself, but she had; or at least she had tried. Surely turning back toward Perry wouldn’t be as difficult as slicing herself in two pieces, so Vi followed the sound until it changed into something less familiar and instinctual. It was a guttural, but barely audible over the heavy absence of all other sound. It was a held by the throat hiccup of tears. Vi moved toward the spilling over of concealed pain. She almost stumbled over it. It wasn’t the no longer only in her dreams child. It was Danielle in a study cubby. Open books and papers were strewn across the cubicle. The negation of joy spilling out of her did not surprise Vi. Anyone with that much external joy must have been suppressing generations of hurt. Vi rested her hand on Danielle’s shoulder and, in the way that human contact always does, the external walls gave way to the instinctual. Danielle moved into Vi’s arms as if pushed. Vi understood crouching in dark small spaces to suffer in both sound and silence, but to think Danielle shared it was unexpected. Danielle’s unveiling was interrupted by the movement of feet in their direction. She released Vi and pulled her Sunday self back over her head without hesitation. Damp eyes were the only sign of her momentary exposure as she pushed all of her papers and books into her bookbag. Her transformation was so succinct that this must have been a ritual that Danielle had performed before. She turned toward the shuffling feet with the other part almost completely reburied. The other girls in black dresses formed a wall between them. As Danielle stepped into place, she stumbled over something that was unseen. She quickly righted herself and fell into step with her line sisters. She would always be the one in line, and Vi would always be the one off line. Vi didn’t realize how much she had
missed Danielle. The way she took up empty space with her consistent noise. In virtual silence, she had placed her moon books into a corner next to an unsecured door at the back of the library. Vi pushed through the Social Sciences into Early World History and back to the Attic, pulling the few books Locke had left unaltered on the Control Sheet. Locke was still at his desk punching numbers on the phone. But now there was screaming instead of silence between the punching and hanging up.

“Dr. Shamus, This is not my first message as you are probably aware. I am under extreme pressure here and I need to meet with you as soon as possible. You must understand the part that the Attucks Collection plays in the cultural development of this campus. You cannot keep clearing the shelves of the classics for this new wave of afro-nationalist rhetoric. Please call me as soon as possible to set up a meeting.” His words directly opposed the decibel at which he was screaming into the phone. He slammed the handset and looked wide-eyed at Vi’s cart. “What have you done?”

Vi did not know how to respond. She had done as she was told; she had followed his instructions.

“What have you done? How could you have removed these?”

“They were on the Control sheet.”

“Impossible.” He grabbed the crumpled sheets from her outstretched hands. “This is not possible.” He scanned the crumpled sheets through his thick glasses. “How did I miss these? Why would they mark Parmenides and Heraclitus for removal? This is not possible. This is simply not possible.” He collapsed into his chair. It was like when a half-filled balloon is pricked with a pin. Everything began to seep out of. The chair suddenly appeared larger than it had moments before.
“Why don’t you just put them in the room?”

“Do you think it’s that simple? Move them into a room. A room with finite walls and shelves. What happens Ms. Moon when those shelves are filled? What happens when I am no longer here to guard them? What happens then?” Saliva collected in the corners of Dr. Locke’s mouth.

Vi stood in shocked silence.

“Do you understand? No you don’t see. I was right before. Go. Go and live your life. Paint your toenails. Giggle over boys, drink until you pass out. Go do whatever you do outside of here. Go and live your little life unaware. I’ll stay here and mine a world on the verge of cultural self-destruction.”

Vi backed out of Locke’s circle of light. She didn’t feel comfortable enough to take her eyes off of him. She left and retrieved her books from behind the dumpster. There were too many for her to carry alone. She would have to return for them later.

She stood in the center; the courtyard where everything met. If you went south you would be in King’s Dining Hall, West to Woodson’s library, East to Tubman’s Towers, North to Lincoln’s Hall. This was the core of Vi’s universe. The smells of all four corners came and comingled in the air. Deep fried Hope with a side of unexpressed desperation. Vi was sleepwalking. The people were a haze; incomplete; lacking the substance that would make them real or solid. She bumped into a girl with white wires hanging from each ear. The wires moved with her head as she turned to glare at Vi. It was a warning. Watch where you walk. Be careful of who you come into contact with. It was a warning Vi had heeded her entire life. She had heeded until Perry. Her arm began to throb from the contact. These people were real. The child was not. The child was real. These people were not. She stopped moving. He was coming straight toward her, but he
didn’t see her. This was the way he always came. She knew that before she came out here, didn’t she? Was her surprise a lie or had she simply forgotten? She found him again easily within the group of students rushing to the next class. He was real. She was real. The child was real. Or were they all imagined? Shouldn’t she be somewhere? Shouldn’t she be rushing to reread, restudy, and rewitness something someone else had read or studied or witnessed? Why was she out here in the Center waiting for him and pretending she was not? There was a look on his face that she had never seen before, or at least she didn’t recognize it from their shared past. She tried to decipher the look. Was it shame? Complicity? She didn’t move, placing her self in his direct path, just like she had done that day before today. That day when he and his fraternity had moved her. Today she would not be moved. He was closer now, but his eyes never found her face, even when she was close enough to smell the cologne his sister had given him for his birthday. It was like he had foretold that night. She was invisible. Somehow that thing he had done to her, the way he had pushed himself inside of her without her permission, without her willingness, without her want had made her unseeable. She was still real. The throbbing in her chest was proof of that. The pain that he had pushed inside of her that night clawed its way up from between her thighs, past her womb and into her chest. He had passed her by the time it attempted to make its violent appearance in the Center. She clamped down on her mouth and ran out of the Center to the thicket of bushes on its periphery. The space was unoccupied. Vi sat on a crumbling cement bench off center and puked. The ground soaked it up quickly. By the time she’d wiped the crevices of her mouth clean, it was nothing more than a slightly darkened stain in the dirt. She fell back in line with everyone else on campus and went to class. The air in Sociology was thick. There were more students there than had been since the beginning of the semester. Ronnie in her dress. It seemed a lifetime ago. The night in the graveyard. She didn’t
want to remember. It was between them. Ronnie was a ghost to her now too. But his legacy filled in his vacated space. Had you heard that Ronnie Tredway had given Dr. Bennett Aids, and then had the nerve to go to his house and tear up his tests result in front of his wife and kids? Had you heard that Ronnie Tredway was a woman masquerading as a man and had been having an affair with Dr. Bennett? Had you heard that Dr. Bennett had raped Ronnie Tredway and he was going to press charges and sue the University? He’s going to get paid. The whispers no longer followed her. It was all about Ronnie now. She waited with everyone else, listening to the speculation of how Dr. Bennett would counter the attacks on his penis and his ass.

When she came into the class with a fiery red head of frizzy hair and clear blue eyes, the buzzing grew into a roar. “Hello I’m Dr. Schlater. Dr. Bennett has taken a leave of absence and will not be returning this semester.”

“I heard he got the Aids.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. There’s no need to speculate on why Dr. Bennett is unable to continue. His leave is due to personal issues. Meaning they’re not up for discussion. All you need to know is that your credits are safe. Now let’s talk about the African familial structure.”

Vi stopped listening after that. Dr. Bennett had run off. Ronnie’s revelation had forced a man’s displacement. Will moving change Dr. Bennett? Is place that significant? Had it mattered for her? She carried her legacy in her blood. Did that mean that she could not outrun it? How does one outrun something as essential as blood? Was Dr. Bennett’s dichotomy blood-based? Will he be able to integrate both of his faces into one or will he simply be dragging both selves into a new classroom on a new campus? Would either face mourn the lost of Ronnie? It was the first time she had considered it. If Dr. Bennett loved Ronnie than surely Ronnie, whole and complete Ronnie, could love Dr. Bennett. She had left him alone. She had not been there. The
realization pushed her toward Hughes’ Hall. They had avoided each other since the graveyard.

The thing that she had given freely to Ronnie was a chasm between them.

She knocked. There was no answer. She knocked again and the door swung open.

The room was a single. Instead of pushing the twin to the wall, Ronnie had placed his bed in the center of the room. The bed separated his desk from the dresser.

Ronnie stood at his desk, putting books into a box. He smiled at her as if her was expecting her, but kept packing the box. “If you’ve come for the happy pills, they’re over there.” He gestured toward the dresser.

Not knowing what to do with herself, Vi followed his nod and leaned up against the dresser. Bumper stickers lined the top like paint. Say No to Drugs lay across Where’s the Beef?

He taped up another box. “I’m done altering my consciousness. They’re yours. Take them. Sell them. Flush them. It’s up to you.”

“What are you going?”

He didn’t answer.

“Ronnie?” She wanted to put her arms around him and make him stop packing, but the bed was between them.

“I am leaving Poorchild. This place is no longer for me.”

Vi reached out to him in the only way she knew how to. “But what about the revolution.”

“The revolution?” He smiled. “There was never any revolution. Only lies. Only me not willing to stand in my truth.” He extended his hand across the bed.

She took it.

“These foolish boys who think playing with their own dicks make them fags are trying to kill me. They think if I’m dead then they can somehow kill that part of themselves.”
Vi opened her mouth, but Ronnie silenced her.

“They don’t realize that we are not the same. That I am not them. And even if I die, it will still be in them. It’s over for me here. I guess I’m not much of a revolutionary. Turns out I’m not willing to die for understanding.”

“But how can you just walk away.”

“I’m not walking. Poorchild I’m running. I’m going to go to Miami or Atlanta. Somewhere that black men can love black men. Yes, I’ve decided that I am gay. That I will love only men.”

“Place won’t change anything.” Didn’t she know that more than anyone? Her dress was the only thing left in the emptied room. It lay across the stripped bed like any other unexceptional collection of fabric and thread with its true power cloaked by the dry cleaner’s thin plastic covering. Is that what Superman’s cape looked like between uses? “I think you should keep it.”

“No, that belongs to you. I was only borrowing it. Besides it’s infamous now.”

Vi clutched the dress to her chest, wishing that the dry cleaners chemicals had left some fragment of Ronnie Before behind.

“Hey. I want you to have something else.” He handed her a blue and white tie-dyed rabbit’s foot with a key attached.

“Blue Thunder?”

“Where I’m going Blue Thunder can’t take me. Take her.”

She couldn’t watch as Ronnie continued to pack himself in boxes and prepare to leave her. She walked out of her infamous dress in one hand and a rabbit’s foot and baggie full of pills in the other. She was alone.
On the last trip back from the dumpster, Vi stopped at the phone. She needed to call home and to tell Cecilia what? The phone rang three times before Cecilia picked up.

— Hello.

— Vi?

— Yes

— You sound How have you been?

—

— Vi?

— I’ve been I’ve been well.

— That’s good to hear. How are your classes?

—

— What about your roommate?

— Danielle?

— Yes. Danielle.

— She is well. She’s invited me home with her for the break.

— Oh

—

— You’re not coming home.

— Oh. Do you want me to? I’ll just tell her that I can’t

— No. Don’t do that. Go with your friend. Have a good time.

— Cecilia?

— Yes Vi?

— Take care of yourself.
— Of course. You do the same.

She placed the phone back into the cradle and she envied it. She understood Perry’s need to return to the unreturnable. She understood the need to climb back into the uterus that had expelled her so finally seventeen years before. It was impossible, but in that moment she wanted it more than she wanted anything. She knew that Cecilia had nothing to offer her. It was all up to her. She fell asleep clutching a picture of a man without a face that she had to find, and a room full of books that were meaningless.

When she reentered the Attic, Dr. Locke’s absence echoed through the cavernous space. A heavy-set woman with glasses on her forehead took up his space.

“What happened to Dr. Locke?”

She pulled the glasses down over her eyes and looked Vi up and down. “The thing that always happens to Dr. Locke.”

“Is he coming back?”

“He always does. Tenure is a wonderful thing.” An opened newspaper sat in front of her on Locke’s desk. “I’m Mrs. Lattimore. I will be running long term storage for now. Here is your list.”

Vi reached forward and stumbled. There was something more than Locke missing; the Attic’s heartbeat. “Why isn’t the printer on?”

“That old thing. Why would it be?” She looked over her glasses.

“When Dr. Locke is here the printer never stops.”
“Sweetie, I’m not sure what you’re talking about, but there is no one on the other side of that old thing. The pull list is generated monthly and distributed through e-mailed. They actually bring down Locke’s copy because he refuses to get a computer.”

Vi started to tell her about the revisions, but Mrs. Lattimore, with her over the reading glass eyes, didn’t look like revisions were something she valued. Vi never thought that she would miss the sound of that dot matrix printer moving back and forth across the roll incessantly. Vi was surprised to see Tunisia behind her cart and waiting in front of the freight elevator, just like before. “Dr. Locke talked about you like you were dead.”

“Yeah. That old nut thought I was working for the folks ACPAC. It don’t matter though cause he wasn’t never really running stuff no way. After he fired me, Dr. Cristabel figured he was really losing it, and decided it was time to step in again. Now he’s back on one of his vacations.” Tunisia used air finger quotes to solidify her story.

So Vi had failed again. She had not been the source of Tunisia’s dismissal, but had she been the source of Locke’s vacation?

“You know, Frenchtown Gardens. Dr. Locke got him a permanent suite down there.”

“What?”

“You ain’t heard about Old Dr. Locke . He used to run this place.”

“The library?”

“No Chicago, The whole University. They say he lost it back in the nineties. Went to a Kwanzaa celebration in full greek toga. No drawers or nothing. They say the family jewels was on display and everything. That was the first time they sent him over to Frenchtown Gardens. After that seem like he’d get better, just to go back every other year or so.”
How had Dr. Locke descended to the Attic from the Head of the University? If a man as erudite as Locke could not figure out how to survive without pretending, what hope did she have?

“I need me a job I can’t get fired from, even if I show up at work butt-naked. Right, Chicago?”

Vi smiled in returned, but she wanted Tunisia to stop talking. The next time she needed to get rid of someone she was going to have to come up with a more permanent plan.

And just like that Tunisia dismissed Locke from her view. “You going home for the break?”

Home was a foreign concept. Return was not possible. “No money. I’m going to stay in the dorm.” How could Dr. Locke be erased from this place so easily and quickly?

“You going to HAH?”

“What?”

“They close the dorms over the break. You didn’t know that? If you staying, you staying at HAH. It’s an old rundown camp on the edge of town.”

She shrugged the idea of further displacement away. It didn’t matter to Vi. Here, there, home, away; it was all the same.

They were still in front of the freight elevator. Mrs. Lattimore now sat behind a book with a woman with blowing hair on the cover, and expressed no concern over the non-movement of their carts. Vi wanted to escape all the difference that Locke’s banishment had fostered. She said the words that she would have never had said to Locke. “Mrs. Lattimore, do you mind if I leave early? I have a paper to turn in.”

Mrs. Lattimore barely looked over her glasses. “Of course dear. This old place takes care of itself. Enjoy your break.”
The thick air helped to keep Vi on her feet. The baby tugged at her t-shirt. Vi didn’t bother to look down. She knew what she wanted. It was what she always wanted. The baby was so thin now. Her fat cheeks had collapsed onto the bone underneath. Her swollen belly protruded over her diaper. Vi could not look at her. She knew it wasn’t getting better. Perry’s Canon had left them worse off than before. Was she truly insane like Locke? Was Tunisia? Where was the line that separated Perry from her kind of crazy. He had decided not see her and now he didn’t. Was it crazier to see someone who was not there or to not see someone that was there? If that was the case the entire campus was crazy. Maybe she could use Perry’s method and write it down; record it as a way to release it. She put her pen to the paper and let it move, but when she read what she had written it was nothing. The same word over and over. Crazy.

— What makes me crazy?
— Vi no one is saying you are crazy.
— Is that why people come to the Centre? Because no one says they are crazy.
— People come here for a lot of reasons. Some come for a much needed respite. Others come because they have things they need to work out. Others come

— I believe that I have breast cancer. I tried to give myself a mastectomy. Where do I fit?
— You don’t need to fit Vi.
— I don’t fit that’s why I’m here. I had the nerve to disagree with the diagnosis, so that makes me crazy.
— Not crazy. Vi I’m more interested in why you believe you have cancer.
— Is the why more important? If I have it, would the why be more— interesting?
— But all your tests were negative. Your doctors believe
— So my sanity is not about my why, it’s about my belief versus the doctor’s belief
— Do you believe in God?

— Do you?

— Yes

— Can you prove God exists?

— No

— Your belief is based on something intangible, unverifiable, untestable.

—

— You believe in a man in the sky that controls and assists everyone and everything. At least the good sound stuff. Because everything bad is blamed on his shadowy nemesis. Right?

—

— Yet you are sane and I am not.

— But Vi this isn’t about my belief.

— It is. Because you have the power to keep me here. I am crazy because I believe I have a cancer that will eventually kill me.

—

— But what you need to know is that I will never again try to cut it away. I know the cutting will kill me now, and the whole point of all this is to live. Do you understand? The why is the desire to live. Do you understand?

— Yes. Vi. I understand
She was glad she’d waited. It was the Saturday before the dorms were to close for winter break. 

On Monday she would have to leave Tubman’s Tower, at least temporarily. But for now she was free. Tallahassee was more itself now that most of the students had returned to their origins. The locals folded in on themselves after the outsiders left. Frenchtown Gardens was exactly as it sounded. It looked like postcards Vi had seen of Versailles. The ornate black iron gates were flourished with an F and G on either side. This was no Center. From the outside The Centre could have easily been the head office for a small to middling insurance company. But this place had more in common with Perry’s Club. The walk from the main street to the main house was at least a mile. The heat was the only reminder that she had not gone through some sort of time warp. The manicured hedges lining both sides of the mile long driveway opened up into a circular driveway with a fountain reminiscent of Chicago’s Buckingham Fountain. Vi wondered if that too had been a gift from our European cousins or was it just a copy. The double doors stood wide open. Vi felt small passing over the threshold.

“Welcome to Frenchtown Gardens. Your Respite from the World. May I help you?”

Her first answer was the most honest one. “No.” The strange look the smiling receptionist gave her told her that that was not the right answer. “I’m here to visit Dr. Locke. I called earlier. My name is Viola Moon.”

The smiling receptionist looked down at a list that seemed to hold the answers to everything. Of Course. Dr. Locke is, ” she looked at the list again, “in the Napoleon room.”

Vi smiled back trying not to use her eyes. “Really?” She thought the girl must have been joking. The smiling receptionist continued to smile, but in a way that conveyed no warmth. Vi thought that type of smile must take more time than she had to perfect. Vi followed the direction of the clearly labeled halls until she reached the Napoleon Room. It wasn’t like those places you
see in movies. All white, with no sharp edges and residents in various ranges of sanity involved in pedantry time gobblers. This was a mahogany paneled smoking lounge. The room was full of plush furniture and walls lined with bookshelves that reached to the top of the twelve-foot ceilings. She found Dr. Locke at a small desk in the corner. The desk was covered with leather-bound editions of the Classics. Dr. Locke was halfway through Melville’s Classics.

“Dr. Locke? It’s me. Viola Moon.”

He moved his glasses down and peered over them. Vi was struck by the happiness on his face. He smiled at her. “Ms. Moon. What a wonderful surprise. Sit please. I’ve just gotten to my favorite part. My eyes aren’t what they used to be. Would you mind reading a little for me?”

Vi was happy to have an assignment, because her master plan to visit Dr. Locke had ended at the door. She had no idea what she was going to say to him. She didn’t even know why she was there. She began to read.

Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance. If the individual so resisted be of a not inhumane temper, and the resisting one perfectly harmless in his passivity, then, in the better moods of the former, he will endeavor charitably to construe to his imagination what proves impossible to be solved by his judgment. Even so, for the most part, I regarded Bartleby and his ways. Poor fellow! Thought I, he means no mischief; it is plain he intends no insolence; his aspect sufficiently evinces that his eccentricities are involuntary. He is useful to me. I can get along with him.

She paused. Locke nodded at her to keep reading.

If I turn him away, the chances are he will fall in with some less-indulgent employer, and then he will be rudely treated, and perhaps driven forth miserably to starve. Yes. Here I can cheaply purchase delicious self-approval. To befriend Bartleby; to humor him in his strange willfulness, will cost me little or noting, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience. But this mood was not invariable with me. The passiveness of Bartleby sometimes irritated me.

I felt strangely goaded on to encounter him in new opposition - to elicit some angry spark from him answerable to my own. But, indeed, I might as well have essayed to strike fire with my knuckles against a bit of Windsor soap.

Vi closed the book. The bookshelves climbed up to the twelve-foot ceilings. “This place is wonderful.”
Locke closed his cloudy eyes. “Yes it is. Please keep reading.”

As days passed on, I became considerably reconciled to Bartleby, his steadiness, his freedom from all dissipation, his incessant industry (except when he chose to throw himself into a standing revery behind his screen), his great stillness, his unalterableness of demeanor under all circumstances, made him a valuable acquisition. One prime thing was this - he was always there - first in the morning, continually through the day, and the last at night.

Vi stopped reading. This was a fiction. Bartleby did not exist. No one can live unaltered. Refusal to act could not keep one from being altered. That was a dream. If Vi could not distinguish the real versus the imagined, she knew there was no such thing as no change. Change was always already. Dr. Locke did not have answers for her.

Vi stood up. “Dr. Locke, I have to get back.”

“But you just got here. Please, I wanted to talk to you about the room.”

“The room?”

“I’m going to need you to move them. It’s only a matter of time before that Cristabel and her cronies discover it. It’s up to you now.”

“Up to me. Dr. Locke I can’t.”

“Ms. Moon you must.” He stood up. “You must.”

“Dr. Locke. Please.”

“What is wrong with you?” He stood up and starting moving toward her chair, forcing her back into her seat. “I ask you to read one short story by one of America’s most prolific writers, but you don’t have time. I give you the opportunity to save the world and you don’t have time. What do you have to do that’s so important?”

Vi crouched into the seat, and it tipped over. She began to crawl toward the door.

Locke continued to follow after her. “You lock a blind man in a library full of first editions. There is a special kind of hell for people like you. You did this didn’t you Ms. Moon. You and
that Ms. Johnson were in cahoots all along weren’t you? You are responsible for me being here aren’t you?”

Vi was on her hands and knees in the hall. “Dr. Locke Please.”

Dr. Locke continued to follow her as she exited the Napolean Room, but he stopped short at the door. It was as if there was some sort of forcefield blocking him from crossing the library’s threshold. “Don’t worry Ms. Moon. This place will not hold me for long. I have tenure.”

The men in scrubs appeared come from nowhere, the façade fell, and the truth of Frenchtown Gardens emerged.

“I’ve got tenure. They can only hold me for so long. I will be back before you know it. Lovely visit Ms. Moon, please return. Please. Who locks a blind man in a library? Who does that?”

She was across the beautiful grounds, and out of the gates before she stopped running. She could not carry Heracles children. She already had too much to carry. Was this her fate, a room that belonged to her at an institution meant for crazy people? Dr. Locke was a blind man who read for a living. He was guaranteed a job for life, but who guaranteed him a life for life. From the other side of the Frenchtown Garden gates, Vi spotted Perry. He was across the street walking slowly, but purposefully. He looked smaller, but she knew it was him, because he did not see her. His hair stood out from his head like a puffy black cloud. He moved among the residents of Frenchtown like a shrinking black ghost. He walked like a man of leisure, with his hands deep in the pockets of his oversized gym shorts, as if he had plenty of time to get wherever he was going; as if whoever he was meeting would wait for him. His stained red t-shirt contradicted his claim of leisure, but that didn’t stop Vi. She followed him from across the street, and behind. She had to anticipate his moves to make sure that he would not see her. He
made a left into Sheffield park; a place that the gainfully employed and housed had abandoned a decade ago. It was a haven for the indigent. He didn’t stop. He passed through, making a direct line to Tallahassee blood bank; the 2nd to last stop for the local desperados. Vi waited. The sun was hot and the wind was unmoving. She was not alone. The child waited along side of her. Not in her dreams, not in her reality, but somewhere in between. The wait was not long. He came out, hands still in pocket. Vi followed wondering what he had traded his blood for. He passed the pawnshop and continued to the seven eleven. He went inside and came out with a brown bag. He turned it up instantly, emptying it and tossing the bag in the trash. Vi waited as Perry tried to make up his mind, as he tried to decide if the liquid courage had been enough. Just as he had seemed to decide that it had not been, she came up. The girl was chubbier than Vi, and her head was hidden beneath a black straight wig. Her full lips were stained a color that Vi would never have worn, but she still could have been Vi’s close relation if she’d had any. Perry’s eyes did not hold the Vi for sale’s eyes for long before he followed her back toward the Motor Inn, right behind the Seven Eleven. Perry still didn’t know that what he tried to take from her couldn’t be taken, and that they couldn’t be bought. What he had traded his blood for had to be given freely. She had to wait for him and tell him, that she forgave him. That he had not meant to pull her insides out between her legs and twisted them into a fiery ball. When he disappeared into room 1863, she waited for him. She did not have to wait long. Perry showed no surprise to see her when he came out smaller than when he went in, because it was not Perry. She had been mistaken, again. The man that was not Perry turned and walked in the opposite direction, and she did not follow him.
CHAPTER 14

The doctor exited the Magnolia suite. She was so young. Had she found the thing that the other doctors had not been able to find? Had she managed to exorcise the demon that Vi had tried to self-exorcise. Cecilia wasn’t sure.

She smiled at Cecilia reassuringly as if she was anticipating her doubts. “Mrs. Moon, I expect to see Vi back here at least once a week until she leaves for school.”

“Dr. Gabrielle. Is she?”

“Ready? Of course.”

“But to go so far away from home.”

“Vi needs this. She needs space…”

“From me? She needs to be away from me?”

“No. Not you. But she does need space to develop her own sense of self absent you. Though she understands that you are a separate person on some very basic level, she believed that you and her were the same person.”

“Is it something I did?”

“There’s no need to place blame. Children love their parents. For some children that love can become something else. She was unable to see a future for herself that was separate from yours. She saw it as some sort of genetic legacy. So when you were diagnosed with breast cancer…”

“She thought she would be.” Why had she not seen this? Had she failed her? She had spent so much of her time making sure that the dream did not become the reality that she had created a reality that was not like the dream, but yielded the same results.
The magnolia suite door opened, and Vi came through. Cecilia examined her for difference, but she looked the same. She did not look sick. The scars that she had carved into her chest were safely covered by the A&M sweatshirt that Cecilia had just given her as both a Coming Home and Going Away present.

“Are you ready?” The words could not capture the full meaning of the question. Cecilia watched Vi to see a sign that she understood the question.

Vi nodded, waved at Dr. Gabrielle and started toward the exit. Cecilia was unsure if she understood. She followed Vi onto the elevator and out into the parking lot. Vi stood with her face up to the sun as she waited for Cecilia to open the trunk.

“You need help with that?”

“No. Cecilia. I don’t need any help.”

Cecilia watched from the curb, as Vi loaded her bag and climbed into the car without one look back.
CHAPTER 15

Vi felt like the American Japanese must have felt. Was she on her way to an interment camp? The dorms had to close for winter break. She had no where else to go. Was she being ushered against her will? She should not have lied to Cecilia. She should not have told her that she was going to Detroit with her new best friend/roommate Danielle. But if she had not lied, she would have had to go back to Chicago, and she was almost sure that that would’ve been much worse.

The bus was half full. These weren’t her people. Yes, they had picked them up all from the same place, but that’s all she shared with them. The bus ride was quiet. Vi wondered why they had to take them so far away. Had they been driving 30 minutes or an hour? Vi couldn’t judge. She was in the midst of that anxiousness that slows time when you are going to a place you’ve never been before. HAH was on the outskirts of town. It was shared by the other university, State U. Home Away from Home: A Joint Project, the sign said. The sign didn’t say a home for the homeless, but it didn’t need to. The riders were only there because they had to be. Agency was moot. The bus turned into the unfinished driveway. The gravel crunched heavily against the bus’ interior silence.

The as yet speechless driver spoke. “Home away from home.” He laughed.

Vi grabbed her belongings and descended into the dust kicked up by their arrival. Cabin-like buildings peppered the dusty ravine, plopped down in no relation to each other, as if each had been built by a band of myopics. Evergreens had been cut back to create a circular perimeter, serving as an orderly border to the scattered confusion.
“Check in at the trailer. You’ll get your cabin assignments. Happy Holidays.” His laughter was only muffled by the closing of the bus door and crunching of the tires as the bus circled back to its origins.

A woman with a clipboard stood on the small raised deck outside of the trailer. Since there was only room for one on the deck, she was forced to look down on all who approached her.

“Name and School?”

“Viola Moon. A&M University.”

“Moon, moon. You’re in Hut 25.”

“Hut?”

“Yes, Hut 25. It’s right next to Hut 24. The latrines and showers are to the right.” She nodded her head toward her left. “And the mess hall is in the Mansion through the center. Dinner is at 4pm sharp. Be late and be hungry.” She looked up from her clipboard. Vi assumed the open space was for questions. They tumbled over each other inside of her head. Could she ever really go home? When would the child leave her alone? Would Perry ever see her again?

“Next. Name and School?” The woman on deck was looking down at the boy behind her.

Vi’s interior dialogue and exterior silence had obviously gobbled all her allotted time. Vi moved out of line and in the direction of the woman’s nod. It took her 30 minutes to find Hut 25. At HAH everything was relative, especially phrases like “next to” and “hut”. The room was actually a square cinder block structure. It felt and smelled like a basement above ground. It made her room in Tubman’s Tower feel like one of those overdone soft places spread between the covers of glossy magazines. The waterbugs were more at home on her cot than she could ever be, but she managed to at least clear them to make room for her suitcase. She emptied her backpack onto the worn desk. The empty envelope with Perry’s name sat on top. The child’s
hunger pains suddenly grew from nothing quickly filling up the space and just as quickly being absorbed by the untreated cinder block. Vi heard it without hearing it. Place didn’t matter. She was Vi’s legacy. He was still their only hope. Vi sat down at the desk. She had to write the letter that she had been struggling to write for weeks.

Dear Perry,

I am not sure why you continue to hurt me. I love . I want to love you. I want to be what you need me to be. You refuse to see me. I see you. I have my father’s eyes. Diana thinks I am father less. But I am not. I am a Moon. My father is a Moon, and his father is a Moon. I have proof. I am not a nigger. I am not a nigger. You took something out of me and I need you to put it back. I cannot continue to drag your sin behind me. You need to take it and give me back. I love . I want to love you. Let me. See me. Like I see you. I have my father’s eyes. Diana was wrong. Dr. Gabrielle was wrong. I am not a nigger.

— When my mother first met her mother, she ran.

— Who ran? Cecilia or her mother?

— Cecilia. She was sitting on the stoop in front of her aunt’s greystone. The smell of sweat and strawberry perfume enfolded itself around her. Something wrapped in that smell made her want to run. The old iron gate shrieked at Cecilia as it opened to run. As the black high heels moved closer to her, each click against the concrete beckoned her to run. Cecilia didn’t want to look up from the run-over patent leather shoes that stopped in front of her, but she did. Her eyes focused on the blood red rose pinned to the woman’s lapel. Full red lips broke into a hesitant smile. “Stand up child, and give your momma a kiss.” The closed burgundy petals joined with the rest, screaming at her to run. Not knowing what else to do, Cecilia jumped off the stoop and bolted past the woman, running straight through the rusted gate. She had no idea where she was going but she ran as hard and fast as she could. By the time she passed the candy store, the pink ribbons her aunt had put in her hair that morning were streaming behind her. Her throat rattled
with dry heaves when she passed the schoolyard. The muscles in her legs started to restrict. But she kept running. Oxygen refused to fill her lungs no matter how wide she opened her mouth. But she didn’t stop. Her heart felt like it was going to explode from her chest. But she kept running.

— How long did she run?

— Til it hurt more to keep going than it did to stand still.

—

—

— Did Cecilia tell you that story?

— No.

— Who told you?

—

— Vi?

— I think I dreamed it.

She signed it Viola Ikewke Moon, and sealed it in an envelope. Something deep inside of her began to grumble, drowning out the child’s hunger. She looked at the clock on the wall. It was ten minutes until four.

Vi entered The Mansion unprepared for the aged opulence. Her sneakers landed soundlessly on the inlaid mahogany floor. The ballroom needed no introduction. The double doors opened to sky high ceilings lit by crystal chandeliers. The temporariness of the banquet tables only highlighted the brilliance of the room’s hardscapes. She grabbed a tray and watched as the student worker piled it high with what some would consider traditional holiday fare. Vi hadn’t
realized how hungry she was. As the student baptized the plate with a ladle of gravy, Vi’s stomach grumbled again.

“And it’s as good as it looks.” The girl with the blonde dreads winked.

Vi took her food and moved into the center of the temporary tables. She walked toward a cluster of A&M’s students, and then she remembered. They did not belong to her; not there and not here. She walked over to a table in front of one of the windows. The ten-foot French window panes cut the landscape into perfect parcels. The window was lined on both sides by a pair of floor to ceiling purple velvet brocade drapes that Scarlet could have made a gaggle of bridesmaids gowns out of. The parceled views in between stood in stark contrast. The land was flat, unlike A&M, and the view to the huts unencumbered. Vi was trying so hard to decode the pattern of their random placement that she hardly noticed the girl now sitting across from her.

She thought she had seen her at check-in.

“Crazy right? They say the cabins are placed in the exact corresponding coordinates of the big and little dipper. Who knows? You’d have to be on much higher ground to verify that report. Even then those dusty cell blocks would probably just blend into the dust around them.”

“You could put a light at the top of each one.”

“Yeah, I guess that would make em more visible at least at night.”

“You work here?”

“Me? No. You a freshman?” Her eyebrows went up into an arch. “At A&M? Amy. I’m a junior at State. This is my third time at HAH.”

“Vi.” She had no other words to fill in the empty space, so she took another bite of her mashed potatoes.

“This? This was Tallahassee’s version of socialism.” She nodded toward the ceiling.
Vi glanced up at the crystal chandeliers that hung from each corner of the room. The ceiling’s fading frescoes were barely visible under the multiple points of light reflecting back onto them.

“See.” Amy pointed up. “You see them all working the land. Blueblood and commoner alike.”

Vi followed her finger. It rested on a woman with a hoe in her left hand. The hoe was also held in the right hand of another woman. The second woman was identical to the first except her face was painted black. “Socialism?”

“Every socialist camp needs a ballroom.” Amy laughed at her own joke. The potatoes stuck to all sides of her mouth.

“Why didn’t you go home?”

“No home to go to. My mother split when I was little. My father. My father moves a lot.”

Vi couldn’t imagine either Cecilia Before or Cecilia After ever splitting in any way other than in two. She shoveled a gravy-encrusted fork full of turkey into her mouth.

The girl scrunched up her nose. “How can you eat that?”

“You don’t eat meat?”

“Nope. Nothing with a mother.”

“What about with a father?”

“Yeah. Same thing.” Amy’s eyes began hopping around the room, and landed on the blonde girl with dreadlocks. “See you around.” She picked up her tray of motherless food and moved to the girl’s table.

Vi looked down at her plate. The gravy had grown into a sea, encompassing everything on her plate. She had suddenly lost her appetite.
Time crept at HAH. The child’s hunger was the only thing that saved Vi from the monotony of solitude and sameness. The child’s erratic reappearance was in object opposition to HAH’s habitual schedule. Wake-up bell at 8am, breakfast at 8:30, and Monday was like Wednesday, and Sundays were identical to Friday’s. The only sign that the end was near were the flyers. They were posted on everything that stood still at HAH. The Thursday before their Friday departure would be marked by a Going Away party. In anticipation of the night’s celebration, the camp seemed to have gone wild. It was like Mardi Gras but on a Thursday. Vi had become accustomed to taking walks. The grounds were better than her Hut. The cabin/cell was lonelier than 203D. She had left all of her moons behind, and though she had found neither the motivation or the means to enter any of the clumps at HAH, she was able to make note from the periphery on her nightly walks. They helped her sleep uninterrupted. One of her favorite spots to observe was the old playground. It had been built after the grounds had become a haven for naturalists instead of socialists. She was on the swings when the voices announced themselves. This was usually the way. Vi moved behind the monkey bars when the laughter moved forward. It was far enough away to observe without participation. She imagined this is what Dian Fossey must have felt when she studied the gorillas, until human nature and the need to be a part had pushed her toward the center and contaminated every thing thereafter.

The laughter wasn’t joy-filled. It was a knife slicing the cool air into thick frigid strips.

“I’m not a Dyke.” The girl tossed her long blond loc over her shoulder. Her lips glistened under the small circle of light that emanated from the sole streetlight in the vicinity of the playground.

Did naturalists like to play in the dark?
“What?” The voice emanated from complete darkness. That it was familiar was unmistakable. It was Amy. The girl who only ate parentless food. From the sound of her voice, she must have been sitting on one of the dilapidated swings.

“Are you deaf? I’m not a dyke.”

The boy whose arm must have always been around the girl’s waist pulled her in the opposite direction. “You couldn’t have found a hot-girl to mess around with?”

The shiny-lipped girl moved out of the small circle of artificial light in a cloud of giggles, and Amy took the girl’s place in the center of light. Vi shifted and sound echoed. Amy’s eyes moved across the playground like a roach scurrying for a safe crevice to hide in. They found only Vi. It was too late. The mist had risen, and the gorilla spotted her. Vi tried to minimize the contamination by walking away, but Amy stopped her.

“Hey. Wait.” Amy ran walked over to Vi. “A&M right?”

“Vi.”

“Hey Vi. What you up to?” There was a neediness dangling on the edge of her question.

Vi had observed long enough to know that this girl was not going to let her walk away. “Just walking.”

“Want some company?”

Vi wanted to say no, but that would be a lie. The solitude of the three weeks without distractions was about to consume her. So she shrugged her shoulders and Amy fell into line next to her. They followed the cut back pines around the camp in silence.

Vi stopped in front of her hut. Her knees ached. She was tired enough to sleep. “I’m tired.”

“Me too.” But the gorilla didn’t leave. Instead it looked at the door of Hut 25 wistfully.

Vi remained standing on aching knees.
“You mind if I stay. I hate being alone. I’ll sleep on the floor. I don’t care.”

Vi did, but she did not know how to extract herself. “Okay.”

While Amy made herself a palate from almost nothing on the hard floor, Vi climbed into her cot, unsealed Perry’s letter and began the revisions. It was her contribution to HAH’s schedule of sameness. Each night she would unseal it, and reread it, marking through what had made sense the day before, but was now undecipherable. The letter looked like one of Locke’s lists. More red than black and white. Then she would reseal it and repeat 24 hours later. A pain radiating from her navel interrupted her resealing.

“Are you okay?” Amy blocked the only light in the room night with her wide frame.

Vi nodded. Words could not be trusted, and the pain sitting at the base of her spine made the air difficult to handle.

“You want me to rub your back.”

Vi wanted to say no, but the knife twisting in her spine made her nod yes.

“Lay on your side.” Amy’s hands were strong and sure as they sought out the pain. “Is it here?”

Vi held her breath in response.

“Just breathe.”

Vi followed Amy’s instructions and exhaled. The knife retreated, and she relaxed into Amy’s strong hands. Just as the pain eased, so did her consciousness. Her eyes closed in sleep.

*Vi was awakened by the silence. The room she was in was unfamiliar. Not the unfamiliarity of HAH Hut 25 or Tubman Tower 203D, but a new place that she did not belong to. She felt wrong here, as if displaced. It was not for her, but when she looked around she was surrounded by her things. There was the doll that Cecilia had given her, that had once been her mother’s. There*
was the picture of her parents. Her father’s eyes were clear. Through the window she could see the swingset that she’d gotten on her 6th birthday. The things in this place belonged to her, but Vi did not belong to this place. She could hear Cecilia singing in the shower. The running water drowned out the words, but the voice was unmistakable. She pulled back the shower and Cecilia turned toward her. Her mouth was missing. Mangled skin had replaced her breasts. The scars were raised and dark, like the Appalachian mountains on the relief map Cecilia had helped her make in 3rd grade. The image of Cecilia’s scars pushed Vi out of the bathroom. Her faceless father picked her up and carried her out of the house. Smoke disguised the way out. Cecilia.

“Daddy wait Cecilia will burn.”

“Don’t worry baby. She’s going to a better place.”

“But Daddy.”

“It’s you and me now Tommy.”

“Daddy, who’s Tommy?” But he kept walking like he did not hear her. “Daddy. Answer me. Please. Daddy. Answer me.”

“Vi. Shit wake up. You okay. You’re going to wake up the whole damn camp.” She pushed her stringy hair back from her face. She sat on the edge of Vi’s cot. She pulled her t-shirt back and forth from her body. She looked as if she had just come in from a thunderstorm.

“I had a dream I’ve never had before. My father. He set my house on fire. It was awful. He kept calling me Tommy.”

Amy blew a long slow breath of air. “Shit. Sorry.”

“For what?”

“I talk in my sleep. I must’ve been talking in my sleep again.”

“So?”
“Vi, I’m Tommy.”

“What?”

Amy sat next to Vi on the small cot. “My mother, didn’t exactly just split. I don’t really remember everything, but I’m pretty sure my father kidnapped me and then burned down the house with my mother in it. I know that’s some deep shit. That’s why I don’t really tell people. Even though I don’t talk about it, I talk it about it. At night, sometimes I relive it in my sleep. It hasn’t happened for a while. With all the excitement earlier. You know. Sorry.” Amy shrugged.

Vi wasn’t sure what disturbed her more; Amy’s banal recount of her mother’s murder at the hands of her father; or the ease in which Amy’s nightmare had become her own. Were her dreams that susceptible to revision? She didn’t even know this strange girl, and yet she had shared a dream with her; a dream that had felt as real as the emaciated child sitting in the corner of Hut 25.

“Shit my shirt is soaked.” Amy pulled her t-shirt over her head. Her breasts were full in the dark room. Amy’s eyes followed Vi’s, and she smiled. “It’s a little cold in here.” Amy stood up and wiped her armpits with her wet t-shirt. “You got a t-shirt I can borrow?”

Vi did not move from her place on the cot. She could not remove her eyes from the pink-tipped breasts in front of her. They reminded her of the baby bottle nipples that lined the walls of the local drugstore.

“What?”

“I’ve never seen a white girl’s.”

“I can’t stand bras. Too uncomfortable. I don’t see why I should be uncomfortable just to make someone else more comfortable. Are they that different?”

“Pinker.”
Amy nodded as if making note for later trivia reference. “You want to touch them. I don’t care. Go ahead.”

Vi reached out with her left hand. She knew she was crossing a line that even Dian Fossey would not have crossed, but she was in it now. She cupped them with both hands, as if she was trying to hold water. She was so captivated with the round heaviness of each breast, that she was shocked when Amy moved her mouth onto hers.

She dropped Amy’s breasts and jumped back. She had gotten too close to the natives. She had done more than just contaminate her research. “What are you doing?”

“What do you mean? I thought.”

“You thought wrong.” Something boiled up inside of Vi. She found herself repeating the words of the shiny-lipped girl. “I’m not a dyke.” She pushed through the door, letting the screen slam behind her. The air was cold, and it moved down Vi’s back. Vi found the matches in her pocket. She couldn’t remember where or how she’d acquired them. She looked at the cover. The Brief Encounter. The aged sign appeared in front of her like a dare. Home Away From Home: A Joint Project. It all seemed to be coming together. Inhaled smoke from her dream clouded her reason. The Brief Encounter matches lit easily. The splintered oak burned easily. It had all been so easy. She watched until the second Home moved into completely blackness. By the time she returned to Hut 25, it was gorilla free.

Vi never imagined that she would be glad to see Tubman’s Towers. Everything was just as she’d left it. Vi walked around the room touching the things that she’d left behind. Her Moons had begun to creep onto Danielle’s side right before Thanksgiving. Now they climbed to the top of both bookshelves, across Danielle’s abandoned cot, filling both closets. Each time she touched
the bindings, the child quieted. “You need him to feed you too.” Vi didn’t remember when the words had left her head and caught air, but somewhere between HAH and Tubman’s Tower she had begun to talk to the child who was now a constant companion. She spoke to her because it kept her quiet. The shrieks of baby hunger still sent chills up Vi’s spine, no matter how accustomed she had become to hearing them. Vi had discovered either in her sleep or her awakening that the child was soothed, if not satiated, by her voice. She moved past the books that were quickly encapsulating the room, and her stomach contracted. She doubled over. The cramps had been coming for over a week, but the blood never followed. She looked at the box of unused tampons on her dresser? When was the last time? The screams began again and Vi’s focus changed. She was fooling herself if she thought that her voice alone would ever be another to soothe? What should she call her? Would calling her keep her here? Had Cecilia called her something before she’d buried her? Vi could not remember the last time she’d heard Cecilia’s voice. Vi needed to demand that she tell her the truth. She had to tell Cecilia that neither this child nor her questions were going to go away.

— Cecilia?

— Vi. Is that you? Are you okay? Why didn’t you call me over the break? I’ve been so
— Worried?

— No. Not worried. I just wanted to hear your voice. This is our first time being
— Not together.

— Yes. A part. Did you have a good time in Detroit?

— Of course. Danielle’s family is perfect. Everything was perfect.

—

— Cecilia? Are you still there?
— Yes.

— How are you sleeping?

— Fine.

— Will you be coming home for Spring Break?

— Vi? Are you coming home?

— If I can. Cecilia. I need to go now. I’m late for work.

— How is Dr. Locke?

— Yes. Dr. Locke.

— Fine.

— Cecilia don’t worry. Everything is perfect. I have to go. I will call you again soon.

Vi hung up the phone quickly and ran back to 203D. Her demands had dissipated the moment she’d heard Cecilia After’s voice. Questions only pushed them further away from each other. Cecilia couldn’t hear Vi’s truth. She needed to believe that it was fine here. Talking would not help them this time either. Words only got in the way of understanding.

— Vi don’t you think it’s time?

— Don’t you want to talk about it?
— It was a beautiful day. As beautiful as a summer day could be, except for the cicadas.

— Cicadas?

— They were everywhere. When they die, they leave their shells behind. There were pieces of them everywhere. On the porch, the window sills. They’re so big and stupid and ugly. They were everywhere. I had gone outside for something. I can’t remember, but I do remember that there was a cicada on my back, and it wouldn’t fly away. I absolutely despise bugs, and these things are the fattest ugliest loudest bugs I’ve ever seen. I finally had to take off my shirt to get that ugly thing off of me. I mean once I got that thing off of me I was in kill mode. I mean I overkilled it. I smashed it into a cicada pancake. Jelly and all. Disgusting. But afterwards I felt powerful and then there they were, in front of me, mocking my power to smash a defenseless insect. I wanted to smash them like I had done that croaking thing. So I grabbed the biggest knife in the kitchen, and I began to cut. I did it because I didn’t want to die, and I knew like I know my own name that they were going to kill me. That they were going to kill me exactly like they had killed Cecilia.

— But Cecilia’s not dead.

— I know that.

— But you said they had killed Cecilia.

—

—

— Slip of the tongue. I meant almost killed her.

— Did you?

— Are you suggesting that I think my mother is dead?

—

— Maybe part of her
— Maybe part of her what? Why did you stop?

— She changed after. It seems stupid to say out loud. Of course she changed. How does that happen to you and nothing change. But

— But what?

— But the cancer killed us.

— What do you mean?

— Cecilia and me were like it’s hard to explain. We were like each other. Like sometimes we wouldn’t talk to each other for days, but not cause we were angry or mad. Because we didn’t need that. Words would only get in the way of our understanding.

— After the cancer?

— What?

— It was just different. And I just didn’t want to die again. I’d rather cut them off, before I let the cancer kill me.

Noises from the hall interrupted her memory. They were happy noises. Noises that girls who had missed each other made when they were reunited. She shut the door. She shut the door and talked to the child that she had decided not to name, at least for now.
Cecilia heard her daughter’s footsteps above her. They were different. There was an urgency in the way Vi moved that Cecilia had never heard before. Cecilia wanted to stop her, to tell her she was not ready to leave here; to go a thousand miles away to a place she’d never been alone; that it was too soon after. But now with an almost grown daughter coming down the stairs pulling a trunk full of every thing she valued, Cecilia wanted to cry. Vi was seventeen. It seemed like a decade since her last birthday. The husks of fallen cicadas peppered the driveway. Dr. Gabrielle had assured her that Vi was ready; that she would not repeat the unthinkable. Cecilia wanted to be as certain as Dr. Gabrielle, but she wasn’t. Vi had assured her that she was fine. But the words were lost somehow in her face, in the distance between them. She wanted to hold her like she used to. The first night back from the Centre, Cecilia had asked Vi if she wanted to sleep with her. Vi had looked at her with such pity. “I’m fine, Cecilia. I’m used to being alone now.” Cecilia had wanted to grab and press her head against the soft place, but the soft place had been cut away. So instead of stopping her, Cecilia batted the husks of dead cicadas from the trunk of the car and helped Vi drag her past to her future.
They were waiting for her. The Attic was lit up like Christmas, though it was spring. She had never noticed that it held the potential for such overwhelming brightness. Mrs. Lattimore and Tunisia sat to the right of Dr. Cristable in a semicircle like Vi and the others had been encouraged to do at the Centre. There was an empty seat facing the semicircle. Vi assumed that it was meant for her.

“Viola. Please. Take a seat.” The frozen smile stuck to her mouth, but did not reach any other parts of her face. Dr. Cristabel nodded toward Mrs. Lattimore who was seated toward her left.

Mrs. Lattimore pulled opened a folder that had been sitting harmlessly on her full lap.

Vi didn’t know whether to sit or run. The exhaustion that enveloped her made the decision. She collapsed into the chair.

All three women stared at Vi’s stomach.

A slow wicked smile crept across Tunisia’s face. “I can’t believe this Bama got knocked up. What an idiot.”

Dr. Cristabel shot Tunisia a look that erased the smile from her face. “Viola. Mrs. Lattimore has brought some disturbing things to my attention regarding your work here at the Library. Present condition aside, we need to focus on other pressing matters.”

Present condition? Could Dr. Cristabel see the child? Was her personal nightmare finally public? Vi was filled with elation and dread. Would this mean they would send her back to the Centre? Did this mean she could be saved? That they both could be saved? Or was this a Locke life sentence? “You can see the baby?”

“Of course Viola. You must be what? Six, seven months along.”
What was she talking about? This baby was not gestating. It was fully-formed and starving to death. They were still as blind as Locke. There would be no rescue. There would be no condemnation. Vi shrunk back into herself. They could not see.

“Viola. Let me get to the point of this meeting.” Mrs. Lattimore handed Dr. Cristable the file. “There are several books missing.”

Vi shrugged. “Shrinkage has been a problem since before I started working here.”

Dr. Cristable’s eyes never left Vi’s face. “The numbers are triple the libraries ordinary shrinkage estimates. There are even books missing from the Attic. How do you explain those?”

Tunisia stared at Vi, barely camouflaging her joy in the inquisition.

Vi realized Tunisia’s antipathy was not personal. She was a gazer. She was the bloodthirsty crowd in the Greek arena; the picnickers at Southern lynchings. Vi didn’t want to be object to Tunisia’s subject. “I’m sorry Dr. Cristable. I have should have said something earlier. But with Dr. Locke’s illness, and everything else. Tunisia took them.”

Tunisia’s antipathy became self-righteous shock. “What would I want with all those books?”

Vi directed all of her answers to Dr. Cristabel. “She told me that she was going to set Dr. Locke up. She wanted to get him gone permanently, and there was some rule about criminal charges being the only way to revoke tenured faculty.”

Dr. Cristable hesitated, looking at Mrs. Lattimore. Mrs Lattimore shrugged. They both turned toward Tunisia.

Tunisia began to boil beneath their gaze. “That’s not what I said. I said it was a damn shame that Dr. Locke could do damn near anything he wanted and still have a job. What about you? She had sex up in the stacks. I saw her. That’s probably when she got knocked up.”
Vi continued to direct her comments directly to Dr. Cristable. “That’s true. It’s what she was holding over me. When I told her to stop, she told me that she would report me. I was so embarrassed.” Vi looked down toward the floor. “I should have said something.”

Dr. Cristable’s frozen forehead wrinkled. “Well. It looks as if we are going to have to take some time to further investigate this. For now, Viola and Tunisia, you both need to take some time off until we figure this out.”

Vi didn’t wait to be dismissed. She quickly ascended the stairs from the Attic. She knew it was only a matter of time before they discovered her lie and dealt with her accordingly. 203D was full of her Moons. She would be kicked out of school. She hadn’t been to most of her classes since Winter break, so dismissal from school was already a foregone conclusion. She would be forced to return. Where? They had said that they could see the child too, but they had gotten it wrong. The sun was as bright as that first day in the fall. She and the child walked to the Booker T’s Four Fountains and sat. Pistons of water shot out of hidden sources, splashing her face. It smelled second hand, recycled from some underground pool without access to any source of fresh water. She turned her face away from the rhythmic spurts. It was quiet and cold for Tallahassee. They were the only ones that sought shelter in the midst of everything and nothing. Vi sat frozen on the edge of the fountain, as if a part of the monument. Booker T.’s frozen lips pushed together in a reprimand sent in her direction. She felt as if she should apologize. Was she a credit to the race? Vi stared down at the worn running shoes that she could not remember not wearing. They were absent of bootstraps. Why did she always end up at the Four Fountains? The concrete felt colder as the bottom of her jeans began to collect the reused water that Booker T. discarded. Three small shrill noises cut through the cold. They seemed to descend from heaven.
Brown angels cloaked in white and silver. They were everywhere, taping and posting, silver and white feathers on everything they touched.

“Isn’t that your roommate?” One of them said to another.

One of the faceless brown angels moved closer. It was a familiar recent memory; Danielle swathed in silver and white. She was not alone. She must have gone over. Vi smiled at her memory of Danielle, and it walked over to her. The look on her face was uninterpretable.

“Vi?” Danielle’s eyes rested on Vi’s protruding abdomen. “You shouldn’t be out here without a jacket or something. It’s not summer yet.”

Vi smiled in response, afraid that sound would dissipate this living memory.

“Come on. I’ll walk you back.”

Vi let Danielle pull her to her feet, and leaned on her memory the whole way back to Tubman’s Towers with the child trailing closely behind them.

Danielle was speechless when she opened the door to 203D.

Vi felt the need to explain. This space was officially shared. “I had to take them. They are all Moons.”

Danielle kept staring at all the empty spaces that were now brimming over with Moons.

“It’s only a matter of time before they come to take them back.”

Danielle grabbed a towel off the back of the door and led her to the bathroom across the hall from 203D. She must have thought that Booker T.’s baptism was piss. Vi didn’t try to explain. She just let Danielle help her out of the wet jeans that would no longer button around her middle, and into the shower. It felt good to be cared for. The towel dropped to the floor, and Danielle’s eyes found the question mark cradling Vi’s heart.
How could Vi tell this girl that she’d carved this question into her chest, attempting an unauthorized removal? It would just run her back out of her room. She didn’t want to be alone again. She couldn’t be alone again. “I don’t like to talk about it.”

Danielle’s veil dropped as she pressed her lips together. “I understand.” She pulled up her silver and white-flecked jersey, and right underneath her navel were a pyramid of small straight lines. Vi reached out without thinking and touched them. They were rigid and healed over. At Vi’s touch, the veil fell back over Danielle’s face, and she dropped her shirt. She smiled the same way that she had smiled that first day they’d met. Had it been as synthetic back then? Danielle walked her back into 203D, and helped her into a clean and dry pair of sweats. “Are you feeling better? Do you want me to stay?”

Vi wrapped herself in her grandmother’s quilt. “I have class in an hour. I’ll be fine.”

Danielle nodded in understanding and bounced out of the room, Vi wondered what she would have to slice away from herself to ever veil her pain as effectively. But Danielle had left something behind. It was one of the feathers her and her soror brown angels had been posting all over campus. It was a flyer announcing the 8pm sell of the one man who could save them both.

Sound traveled faster than light. She heard the clanking of the chains centuries before she saw the glint of the steal against black flesh. They pushed their way through the throngs to the front of the line. The boy on the stage smiled, flexing his arms in response to the auctioneer’s encouragement. Up close the truth of the chains was clear. She could not have heard iron because they were plastic. Yet the shirtless exposed body was real. She could smell the sweat that glistened across his skin. He fell to the floor and began to do push-ups. First with both hands,
and then with only the right one. The bidders hooted and pushed their palms together. The auctioneer’s mouth opened into a glossy painted on smile. The bidding started high and ended high. He was a fine specimen; bred for pleasure the auctioneer had smiled. Vi rubbed her moist palms down the sides of her sweats. White paddles marked with thick black numbers waved wildly around the dank dance floor. A storm of giggles erupted from a group of girls when one of them was announced as the winner. The specimen left the stage and fell into the arms of his new master. Perry was next. He stepped up on the auction block the way his great great-grandfather probably had. He moved with slow reticence. His eyes followed the path of his own feet as if he was trying to record every action and reaction. The auctioneer began to espouse his bloodlines. He was a legacy. His rough hands were chained together by toy chains, yet she could feel the heaviness, of both the chains and his hands. He was a legacy. It was what had convinced her of her love for him. He had taken something from her. The bidding started low; obviously these enslavers did not care about bloodlines. They cared about what you could lift. And Perry could barely hold up the weight of the toy chains. Why was she here? Why couldn’t she walk away from him? The keloid burned around her breasts. She rubbed her moist palms down the sides of her jeans. The child’s hunger a hum under the noise of the crowd. She had to be here. They were coming for her Moons soon. They were not enough anyway. She had been fooling herself. When the bidding started, Vi waited. She could not allow him to continue to render her invisible. He had to see her. As if he was reading her thoughts, he stop recording the path of his feet and lifted his head. She saw him see her, and her visibility shrunk him. She was too far away to catch him this time. She watched from the middle of the dancefloor as he fell to the ground uninterrupted by her need to save him.
His first word to her after pulling something out from between her legs and months of refusing to see her was Stop. But it was too late. She had been the highest bidder. Who wanted a weak slave? Turns out he had not fallen purely from the strength of her visibility. His tumble had been aided by several shots of GNu punch. They had even helped her load him into the backseat of Blue Thunder. They were glad to be rid of his weakness, and her protruding belly. They had been glad to be able to return to the party and their traditions unencumbered by antagonists. Stop he said over and over before he began screaming it. But his screams only fueled Blue Thunder. She knew she couldn’t stop, so she pushed Blue Thunder toward the beginning or the beginning of the end for Perry and her. She headed back to Albany, as Perry passed out in a small pool of his own vomit.

Albany, like most southern cities, was in the process of awakening. She pulled up across the street from Canon Manor. Perry’s breathing was even and loud in the back seat. Vi left him in Blue Thunder, and stood at the edge of the cluster of blue spruce that shielded the veranda from the driveway. Cleo appeared as if summoned with a steamless cup in her hand. Vi watched through the blue spruce as the older woman contemplated the sunset from the chaise. Vi also watched as the gardener moved from the other side of the veranda and sat at Cleo’s feet. He removed her slippers and kissed Perry’s mother’s feet, and then her thighs and then in the place her thighs met. She watched as Cleo continued to contemplate the sunset, and sip from the steamless cup in her hand. Though Cleo’s eyes were open, the gardener was invisible to her. Just like Vi was invisible to Perry. Vi moved to the edge of the veranda, abandoning the cover of the wall of blue spruce. She waited for the gardener to return to whatever else he did in the light of day. When he had completed his task and disappeared around the back of the property Vi cleared her throat.
Cleo stopped contemplating the now risen sun. Her teacup tottered as she tried to placed it on the side table. “I didn’t hear anyone drive up. You startled me.” Her eyes moved over Vi’s shoulder. “Has my Perry decided to surprise me?”

“No.”

“Is Perry alright?” There was no real alarm in her voice.

“He’s fine. Drunk. Passed out in the car.” Vi nodded toward the road.

Cleo rested back in her seat. A sardonic smile crossed her face. “His mother’s child I guess.” She lifted the cup to her lips.

“I came here because I need.”

“A father for your child.”

“How did you know?” Could she see the child next to her, or was she like the rest, referring to a child that didn’t yet exist? “Perry doesn’t want me anymore Cleo. I can’t get him to see me like he did before. I want to go back to how it was before.”

“Before. Don’t we all. We want to go back when we were younger, prettier, freer. It’s the nature of what comes before child. An unrealizable goal, but it’s all we have.”

Was she right? Was before all they had? How was that possible? “What about now?”

“What?” Cleo turned her head as if she was listening to something else.

Vi kneeled in front of her chair. “Now. I want now to be like before. Is that possible?”

She looked at Vi with a confused expression on her face. “What are you talking about? Now is now.”

For a moment Vi had thought this woman had something to offer her; an answer of how to move forward. Vi stood to leave when something moved on the other side of the French door.
“Only farmers and whores are up at this hour, and I don’t hear any tractors.” Diana clumped onto the veranda with one platform on and one in her hand. Her perfectly applied makeup had expired, and dark shadows hung under her eyes. “Oh it’s Perry’s Revenge.” Diana sat down next to her mother and assessed Vi from head to toe. Her bitter laughter rang out over the waking house. “He’s gone and done it again.” She poured a cup of tea. “Please tell me you aren’t just going to blindly accept this bastard as your own.”

Vi began to back off of the veranda. The blue spruce seemed miles away.

Diana continued her tirade. “Perry can just drag any little thing in here and knock her up, and you welcome it and her with open arms.”

Vi was confused. They were talking about the child like it was both here and not. Both Perry’s and not. This child was here, and it was belonged only to her. “What are you talking about?”

“Who do you think you are dealing with you little gold-digging pickaninny. You’ll get what that other one got. $300 and a ride home from the clinic. I know all about you Viola Moon. I know all about you and your people.” Diana disappeared into the house.

Perry stumbled onto the veranda. “Mother, don’t worry. I’m not making you a grandmother any time soon. That is not my child.”

“Of course it’s not. The child is mine. She belongs only to me.” Vi must not have said it out loud, because Cleo kept talking to Perry as if she had not said anything.

“Perry how can you be so sure?”

Perry leaned against the aged railing to steady himself. His head bounced forward like someone sleeping sitting up. “Because Mother, I can’t have children.”

Cleo laughed. “Of course you can. That little thing from the other side proved that.”
Perry lifted his head and smiled at his mother. It was probably the first real smile she’d ever seen on his face. “She did, and I after that scare I had a vasectomy.”

Cleo almost knocked over her chair standing up. “What? How could you?”

“I decided that seven Perry Canon’s were more than enough.” He turned toward Vi. “So you see Ms. Moon, this child could not be a Canon. I’m afraid you’ve kidnapped me for nothing.”

Diana reappeared. “There he is. The golden child. Just thought you might want to know that your little girlfriend is a liar. Her father isn’t dead. He is alive and kicking in the middle of some Hicksville town in Alabama. Probably somewhere waiting for her to get some sort of big payoff.” Diana began to laugh loud enough to wake every Canon in Hangman’s Hall. “Two minutes on Google. I wonder what I could find out if I actually gave a damn.” She threw the paper at Vi. “Go away, little peopleless girl.” Diana turned as Cleo sank back into her chair. “Mother, what’s wrong?”

Cleo shook her head and placed her hand over her heat. “How could he?”

But Vi was already inside of Blue Thunder. Diana had given her more than she could have wished for. These people had nothing else to give her. Right in front of her on the paper was his full name. Ellington Moon. He was alive and living in Elysia Alabama. She didn’t know why, but she felt as if time was running out for both of them. The child was so emaciated that she could barely keep up with Vi. The pain that had begun at the base of her spine months before had become more consistent. Vi pointed the car and headed toward Alabama. Ellington Moon was alive.
CHAPTER 18

The voice was soft and hesitant on the other end of the phone. The exchange on the caller I.D. had suggested that it was Vi, but it was not Vi. It was the girl that had once lived with Vi. And the girl that had once lived with Vi told Cecilia what she had already known. Her second chance child was not okay. Cecilia hung up the phone to pick it up again. She waited with false patience as the airline played a soulless version of we are family. She would have to go. She would have to find the strength to save this child possibly from the one before. She would have to.

“Are you okay?”

“Of course not.” Her brown eyes opened to green ones surrounded by years of smiles.

The cerulean eyes smiled. “I’m sorry for waking you, but you were talking in your sleep and you seemed…”

She waited.

“You seemed to be having quite a nightmare.”

Cecilia blinked slowly not wanting to recall the nightmare that rested uneasily on the other side of wakefulness. She recognized his need to know that she was comfortably settled on this side. “All these years. Who knew I was a talker?” Her smile seemed to assure him.

The altered voice emanating from the insufficient speaker interrupted. The weather was a perfect 78 degrees. Had she enjoyed her flight? Would she enjoy her stay?

Smiling eyes rested back into his seat and Cecilia did the same. She had to prepare for landing.
Cecilia could not focus on the unfamiliar place she had sent her child to. She only knew that she had to find her. The rental car did not seem to understand the urgency of its task and strained under Cecilia’s demand. The two-lane highway from the airport to A&M’s campus was lonely at this time of the year, and Cecilia fully embraced her solitude. She pulled into the parking lot surprised at how difficult it would be to actually come face to face with her only child. Would her arms be enough? There was no longer a soft place between them. They had not been enough to stop Vi before. Somehow Cecilia would have to find the strength to make her arms enough. Tubman Towers was simply a maze that she had to travel through to get to her child. She did not notice Lil Wayne’s lispy bravado, or notice the small clouds of talcum that peppered the hall in front of the showers. Context was only background. The numbers were stark, dead in comparison with all of the woman life that permeated every nook and cranny of that not quite a tower. She pressed her knuckles against the door. Silence responded. She did it again. Still nothing.

Cecilia found the Attic like a mother-bear following the scent of her cub. A girl that could’ve been Vi was seated in the bright subterranean room with her back toward the entrance. Cecilia exhaled. She was there and she was whole. She pulled her from behind. The face that met her was not her child’s. “I’m sorry I’m looking for Vi.”

The girl barely covered a snarl. “Vi don’t work here no more.” She began pushing a cart toward the room’s edges without looking back.

“What? When’s the last time you saw her?”

The girl tossed a look over her shoulder and shrugged.
Cecilia closed the space between them in two steps. Her grip spun the girl 180 degrees.

“Listen little girl. I’m going to ask you one more question. And you are going to look me in the eye and answer me like you have some sense. Is Dr. Locke here?”

The mask fell from her face, and the little unsure girl that had been hiding behind it emerged.

“No. Ma’am. He doesn’t work here anymore either. They got him up in Frenchtown Gardens. He can’t even help himself.”

Cecilia turned and headed back toward the door.

“You might want to check at the GNu house though. The Gamma Nu’s. That’s where her boyfriend live. Perry. He probably knows where she is.”

Cecilia did not look back at the hiding girl. She ascended the stairs up to the library in a fog. Vi had a boyfriend that she had never mentioned. Someone who was more in between her child’s thoughts than she was or ever would be again.

The Gamma House was easy to find. Cecilia only had to follow the trail of testosterone. She rang the bell. There was no response over the din of rap lyrics floating through every space in the wood frame exterior. So Cecilia abandoned the doorbell and began ramming her knuckles against the battered steel door.

Silence interrupted the blaring speakers and a voice boomed from behind the door.

“Somebody Momma out there banging like the police. I’m not answering it.”

Cecilia leaned into the door. “One of you better answer the door before I knock it down.”

It opened suddenly. A young man in a shirt covered with greek symbols blocked the door.

“Sorry about that confusion ma’am. We had a long night. How can I help you?”

Cecilia strained to see past the symbols and the boy, but she could not. “Perry? Is he here?
“Perry’s crazy baby momma carried him out of here a few days ago.” Deep laughter pushed past the shorn man/boy in the door.

“What?” Cecilia blinked back the man/boy’s meanness.

He turned his head to the side, as if he was talking to someone of limited intelligence. “That crazy pregnant girl bought him at the auction and took him.” He took a sip from the red plastic cup in his hand. “We haven’t seen him since. If you find that mark, tell him he’s on dishes detail.”

Cecilia stepped up to deposit both her fear and rage onto this boy, but he seemed to anticipate her retribution, and the door closed. The testosterone-fueled noises erupted within the confines of the man/boy sanctuary. Cecilia backed off the porch onto the unkempt lawn.

“Mrs. Moon?”

Cecilia looked toward the white and silver child that had called her by name. She wore her smile in the same way the girl from the Attic had worn her scorn. It was a place to hide behind.

“Mrs. Moon. I recognize you from Vi’s picture.” She extended her hand toward Cecilia. “I’m Danielle. The one that called.”

Cecilia contemplated the brown well-manicured fingers on the pale callous-free palm which was attached to a wrist with the faint pyramid of ridges.

“Have you seen her?” They were all hiding from themselves, from each other, from their parents. Why had she sent her child to this place? So she could perfect her game of hide and seek?

“No. Not since the auction.”

Was it really Vi those boys were talking about? “I’ve been to her dorm, to the Attic. Do you know anything about this Perry boy?”
Danielle shrugged. A frowning bald man/boy emerged from the house. “Dani. What’s taking you so long?”

“I’m coming.” The veil fell for a moment as she turned back toward Cecilia. She reached into her silver and white jacket. “When you find her can you give her this?” She placed a key in Cecilia’s hand. “I’m moving in with my boyfriend.” She paused before turning toward the house. “It’s a lot cheaper than living on campus.”

Did this child realize that she was not her mother, and that she did not care who she was living with? All she wanted to know was how to decrease the distance between herself and her child. “Is Vi pregnant?”

Danielle looked toward the man/boy still standing in the door.

“Is this Perry boy the father?”

She shrugged again. “Vi and me haven’t been that close lately. I’m sorry Mrs. Moon. All I know I told you on the phone.” She began to walk away. “She spends a lot of time in the Attic. Did you go there?”

Cecilia waved away her impotent suggestion. “How do I get to Frenchtown Gardens?”

There was a smell that surrounded the place that reminded Cecilia of cicadas. That summer that Vi had decided to cut into the heart of herself. The air was so thick. Cecilia had to push herself across the threshold.

The smiling receptionist seemed more interested in the light that followed Cecilia inside. Her eyes held the space between the closing door and its frame until it disappeared. Only then did she turn toward Cecilia. “Welcome to Frenchtown Gardens. Your Respite from the World.” She said it the way people say things after meaning has separated from intention.
“I’m here to see Dr. Locke.” Cecilia was nervous and she didn’t know why. The feeling that had grown in her over seventeen years ago had return.

“He’ll be pleased. Please sign in.” She whispered something into the phone. “Follow the cerulean stripe. He’s in the Library.”

Cecilia found the blue line easily. Until, of course, the line changed to orange, or was it persimmon. If it hadn’t, she would have kept walking. There was something comforting about following without thought. But she could not acquiesce control yet. She still had to find her child. She knew like she knew that her first-born second-chance child was in real trouble. It was a feeling similar to the one she’d felt the day that she could not recall.

Dr. Locke was easy to distinguish in the dim room. He was alone, if you could call anyone sitting in the midst of hundreds of imagined worlds alone. A book sat open in his lap. His eyes were pointed toward the shelf lined with classics in front of him. His eyes turned toward her as she entered.

“Dr. Locke?”

“Yes? Forgive me. I’m unable to distinguish your voice. Have we met?”

“No. I’m Cecilia Moon. Viola’s mother.”

“Ah. Ms. Moon’s mother.” His eyes moved to the 12 foot ceiling. “Is she with you?”

“No. Dr. Locke. I’m actually looking for her.”

“Is she lost?”

Was she? Cecilia didn’t not want to speak those words into the world. “ No.”

“Mrs. Moon, please excuse my manners. Existing in such solitude tends to dull one’s interpersonal competence. Please have a seat?”
There was something about the way he looked through her with his sightless eyes that unnerved Cecilia.


Cecilia shook her head, before realizing that her body was undecipherable to this man. “No.”

“You’ve come here for something more haven’t you? I may not be able to see, but I’m not blind.” He laughed.

Cecilia laughed with him and at herself. Maybe she was not as undecipherable as she believed. “I received a call from Vi’s roommate. She told me some disturbing things and I haven’t been able to reach Vi for a few days, so I thought it best that I come down and see her face to face.”

“So she is lost.”

Cecilia squirmed in her seat. “She could just be off with friends for the weekend. She doesn’t even know that I’m looking for her.”

“But your perspective is the only one that counts. Columbus didn’t discover America from the native’s perspective, yet we still close down all of our fine government institutions on his birthday. Perspective is fluid, yet fundamental, Mrs. Moon. And if you don’t know where she is, then she is lost.”

The thing at her center from the time she could not recall was getting bigger.

“And you need help finding her. And you’ve come to me?”

“Yes. Dr. Locke. I need your help to find her.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t help you. I made it a practice not to foster personal relationships with my subordinates.”
Cecilia was not surprised at her failure. It was a long shot. Why would the man that Vi worked for know where her child was? “Thank you Dr. Locke. I appreciate your time.”

He laughed a bitter laugh. “My time. Mrs. Moon, time is all I have no matter how limited some may wish it.” He pointed his eyes his toward Cecilia’s face. “You know your daughter was my only visitor. That is before you. I believe I may have frightened her. When you find her, and rest assured that you will, please give her my sincere apologies. This place changes you in ways that you can’t imagine. Please tell her. Please tell her that I look forward to seeing her again.”

Cecilia leaned against the rental car. She was no closer to finding Vi, then she had been when she’d first answered that phone call. She reached for the keys to the car and pulled out the other one; the one Vi’s roommate had given her. She should go back to Tubman Towers. Maybe Vi was back, and all of this had been for nothing.

203D. The starkness of the numbers reflected the starkness of the room. Cecilia couldn’t imagine that it had looked any differently ten months earlier at Vi’s arrival. It was a cell, consisting of the bare necessities of life. The only thing that moved 203D beyond a chamber of incarceration were the books. They were all different. Different subjects; different authors; the thing that connected them all was the moon; authorship, subject, marked both externally and internally. The commonality was stretched to the limits of sameness. These moon books were a sundry of diversity; a collected lie. It must have taken her days, weeks to amass such a useless collection. What was she looking for? Cecilia approached Vi’s desk. The lone scrap of celluloid hanging precariously on the bulleted board exacerbated her feelings of loneliness. Why had she sent her child here? Cecilia pulled out the push pin. His face was not distinguishable. His eyes a memory.
Is this it? Him? She had done everything in her power to erase him from both of their lives. It
had not worked. She picked up the pillow on the bed. The only soft place in the room. Cecilia
could smell Vi on it. She had pushed herself to the edges to make room for him at her center. She
wouldn’t let Vi do the same. She would have to find the boy. If she found Perry, she would find
Vi.

She let the rental car idle across the street, as she watched the house. Vi was living Cecilia’s life
in fragments, moving herself to the edges for a boy. She had sent her away to avoid this; to stop a
reincarnation. Cecilia needed Vi to be ahead of her, not behind her. After an hour the girl and the
man/boy she was moving in with were the only ones to exit the house. “Danielle.”

She stopped, but the boy kept walking. “Mrs. Moon? You still haven’t found her?”

Cecilia shook her head. “Is there anyone else that may know where she is? A friend?”

Danielle shook her head before her face lit up. “Vi did have a friend. He left last semester
though, so I don’t know if he would be any help. Ronnie. Ronnie Tredway.” She turned toward
the man/boy that was leaning against a car. “Jù, isn’t Ronnie Tredway your homeboy.”

“How Ronnie?”

“You know Ronnie Tredway. The one who left after that stuff with Dr. Bennett.”

He raised his head. “I know of him. I don’t know know him. But yeah. His people from
Quincy.”

“Do you know where they stay?”

He blew out as if exasperated. “What you trying to say? Me and homeboy was tight like that.”

“Jù, this is important. Everybody knows where everybody lives in Quincy.”
When he pulled himself off of the car and began walking toward them, Cecilia knew without knowing that she would find her second-chance child.

The house reminded Cecilia of something she’d forgotten. A place that she’d visited once when she’d still had a family. It was the kind of house that generations would get to enjoy. It was meant for both the past and future. Her footsteps echoed up the pine steps. Sounds of a whirring fan, and forgotten radio seeped through the screen door. “Hello.” Her voice floated back unanswered. She walked around the back of the house. A woman was bent uneasily over a vine heavy with green tomatoes, collecting them carefully in her apron.

“Hello.”

She looked up without surprise. “Hey there.” She struggled a bit to stand, and Cecilia quickened her steps to offer her arm. A smile spread across the woman’s lips. “How you?”

“Hot.”

“Well. Yes there is always that.” She removed her hat and fanned herself with it before placing it back onto her head. “I try to wait until the sun is on its way down before I come out here, but it don’t seem to matter much. I just all of a sudden got me a taste for some green tomatoes. You like fried tomatoes?”

Cecilia smiled and nodded.

She gestured for Cecilia to follow her. She walked over to a towering blue spruce and a seat swing that sat nestled under it. “Seem like these tomatoes was begging me to pick them.” She brushed dirt from them as they sat easily in her lip. “They gone make a real nice supper tonight. You welcome to stay … Oh I’m sorry I can’t recall your name.

“I’m sorry Mrs. Tredway. I never gave it to you. I’m Cecilia. Cecilia Moon.”
She laughed as if she’d been caught. “Okay Cecilia. You know how it is. Memory is not what it used to be, and you look like I may have seen you before. You can call me Esther. Now I don’t guess you came all the way out here in this heat to hear me go on about my dinner plans.”

“Actually I’m looking for Ronnie.”

Esther turned in her seat. “Ronnie?”

“Well really I’m looking for my daughter, Vi. I haven’t talked to her in awhile, and I was hoping Ronnie could help me find her.”

“Oh you’re little Ms. Viola’s mother.” She looked closer at Cecilia. “That’s where I know you from. Should have known it when I saw you. She has your eyes.”

Cecilia smiled.

“But I don’t know if Ronnie will be able to help you. He’s up in Atlanta. Been there since January. Tried to keep him close, but they wasn’t ready for my baby up at A&M.”

“Esther. Were Vi and Ronnie seeing each other?”

Esther smiled sweetly. “No Baby. They wasn’t seeing each other. At least not in the way you mean. They sure did love each other though.”

“How can you be so sure? If they loved each other as much as you say they did, then…”

“Ronnie don’t like girls. I mean as least in the way you mean.” She smiled her sweet smile again.

“Oh I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. Ronnie just find the way he is. He’s just fine.” She looked back toward the house. “You want to come in the house while I give him call for you.”

Cecilia shook her head and leaned back on the bench. “I’ll wait here if you don’t mind.”
Cecilia watched as Esther carried her tomatoes house, cradling them with both hands careful not to crush them. Is that what she had done to Vi? Held her too tight? Is that why Vi was… Was she damaged or was she just fine and Cecilia was just looking at through some sort of skewed vision? Either way Cecilia couldn’t shake the feeling that if she didn’t find her child soon she might be lost to her forever. Cecilia barely noticed Esther’s return.

“He hasn’t heard from her since he left, but he said he’d call right away if he did.” She placed her hand on Cecilia’s. “Sometimes these children need to get away from us. They need to separate to decide what kind of men or women they’re going to be. I wouldn’t worry if I was you. That child will be back safe and sound before you know it.”

Maybe Esther was right. Maybe this thing Vi was going through, whatever it was, she needed to go through on her own. As Cecilia drove away from the house, she couldn’t help thinking that somehow she was leaving more than just a plate of fried green tomatoes behind.
CHAPTER 19

She knew when she’d arrived even without the overly friendly signs that had bid her hello and goodbye to the last ten towns she’d passed through. Elysia was the kind of place Vi had dreamed about as a little girl. She stopped at the only gas station on the road to ask for directions to the address she’d gotten off the pieces of hate Diana had flung at her. The old man smiled slow at her question as if directing lost daughters was his sole occupation. Vi turned off the main highway onto a small, narrow, red dirt road that seemed to go straight up. Blue Thunder squealed with a strained determination. She passed two or three turnoffs before she spotted the route number she was looking for. She turned off the steep narrow road that seemed to continue up right into heaven. The trees that had accompanied their climb up the mountain disappeared. There was only a large uneven patch of red earth. The tires kicked up a small cloud as she pulled the emergency brake up. The patch of clay opened up to a mobile home that looked as if it had seen better days. A dusty ancient Packard sat on milk crates on the side of the trailer. They exited the car, and stretched. They’d been in the car for hours, but she didn’t recognize the pressure on her bladder until she’d climbed the stairs leading up to the trailer’s front door. She could hear a television playing through the closed screen door.

A man stood behind the opened door. The full detail of his formation was blocked by the shadow of the well-used screen door.

“I’m looking for Ellington Moon.”

He stepped closer to the door.

“I’m Viola.”
He opened the screen door and squinted back the sun that was shining into his face. Recognition forced him to open his eyes despite the glare. “My Viola. My Viola.” It was a whisper to himself as he held the screen open for them to enter.

She was scared to look at him, so she focused on the room. It was a creolisation of worlds. Handmade blankets of red black and green covered a floral print settee that looked as if it had come straight from an English parlor. Four cane back chairs surrounded a simple pine table. A British colonialist desk sat under carvings from Nigeria. Pieces of colorful silk draped over kente cloth at each window. She leaned back into the homemade red, black and green blanket on the back of the settee. The child struggled for breath at her feet.

“Do you remember me?” His soft face morphed into something harder.

Did she remember? Vi mentally filed through the dreams she had dreamed and redreamed and none of them had revealed any parts of these doughy man and his eclectic taste. Was this what she had been searching through the bowels of Woodson’s Library for? What Diana had thrown at her on a piece of crumpled paper? Was this man sitting at the center of every world her legacy? She didn’t have the heart to tell him the truth. “Yes.”

He smiled. He reminded her of Ronnie. There was something beautiful about his face. A softness that felt more maternal than paternal. “Me and your mother brought you down here when you was still knee high to caterpillar. No wonder you don’t recall. You loved it though.”

This place felt as foreign as the man sitting across from her. “Did we live here?”

“No. no. Don’t really live here now. Just stopping through. This is my father’s land.”

She had a father, and he had a father. This was their land. She had been right. She was not a nigger. She had people. She wanted to ask him to tell her everything, but she was afraid her hunger would overwhelm him, so
silence engulfed them both

“You look just like your mother.”

She smiled. She could not remember a time when anyone had compared her to Cecilia in any way. But as she caught his eye, she realized that his eyes were not hers.

A girl too young to have interfered with their life before came into the house.

“This is my wife, Liberia. Liberia this is my daughter.”

“Hello.” Her face held all the hardness that his lacked. “You staying?”

Vi didn’t know what to say. Even if there had been welcome in the woman’s voice, she knew she could not stay here. This was no place for her, so she lied, recalling one of the towns she had passed through to get to Elysia. “I have a hotel room over in Anniston. Prepaid. Couldn’t get my money back if I wanted to.”

Liberia nodded, and her face softened. It seems Vi had said something to gain her approval. She disappeared down the narrow dark hall into the back of the trailer.

The baby continued to gasp for air. Vi’s discovery of her people had in no way revived her. They should leave. He either was either unable or too late to feed her. Vi opened her mouth, then closed it. She wanted to get her father’s attention, but could not push the word daddy through her lips. “Ellington. I probably should be going.”

He seemed to notice her discomfort. “I want to show you something, before you go.”

Even though they realized that the child’s time was short, they followed him out of the door as the sun was just starting to give way to the evening.

Ellington spoke, but Vi focused on the signified not the sign. The words were just sound. She tried to find the true meaning behind them. But he was a stranger to her, and her interpretation could not be trusted. He was focused on things. First the rusty old Packard they passed in the
yard. It had been his father’s and now it was his. He was going to get it running again and then it
would be Vi’s if she wanted it. Did she want it? She was not sure exactly what he was really
trying to give her. The child’s cry was now a low moan. Vi feared that she would not make it to
the place he wanted to show her. A sharp pain moved through her lower back.

“Do you need to rest?”

“No.” She said. “It’s just the baby.”

“Of course.” He leaned against the trunk of a red oak and waited. “We’re almost there.”

When they reached the four-way stop, the church stood out of the center of the trees like a
beacon. It was not grand. It was a sensible structure. The church had once been the color of the
sun, but time and the sun had faded it into something much less brilliant.

“What’s this?

“Our church.”

Her confusion must have shown on her face. This place was unfamiliar and new. She had
never been there.

“Moons.” He said it as if she was slow.

Of course, he had said we, she was a Moon. They were a collective. She was a part.

So this was it. Holy ground. The place that she should have known without asking. Vi felt no real
connection to the neat used to be familial church, so she waited. In between the child’s gasps,
she waited; for what she wasn’t sure. A flash of light? The rattling of thunder? For the heavens
to open up and rain down on both of them, healing her mind and the child’s body. But nothing
happened, so she held the child’s hand for the first time. It was bones. Lack had eaten away her
imagined flesh.
Ellington was saying something about getting or giving, but Vi could not focus. The child could no longer move on her accord, so Vi lifted her into her arms. As the child laid her head against Vi’s shoulder, she noticed a small patch of cleared land to the left of the church. “What’s that?”

He puffed up, smiled with what looked to be pride, but Vi no longer trusted her own perception. “Family cemetery.” He began moving in that direction, and she followed with the child in her arms.

“Three generations of Moon’s right here. My father, his father, and his father. My brother is there, and this is my uncle.”

So this would be the child’s final resting place. It was all starting to make sense now. Vi could not have imagined a more poetic ending. She would be buried here. Vi searched for the markings that would reflect her name. But there were none marked. “Where’s Viola Moon? I don’t see her.”

“You’re standing on her; breathing her.”

“What?”

“Cremated and scattered. All of them are everywhere.”

Vi scanned the headstones for names that signified the female. “You mean all the women?”

He nodded as if cremation was better: and honored bestowed only on the women. Was it an honor to not be recorded? Ellington seemed to think so. Vi kneeled in the dirt. The child in her arms was dead, but there was no place for her here. She could not be buried among the carriers of the name. Like Diana and Cleo, there was nowhere for her to hang. Her remains would have to stay with her.

“Ellington I need to go.”
“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I just need to be getting back before it gets dark.”

This was an excuse he could not argue with. These roads were not kind to strangers, especially after the sun had fallen.

The child was heavier to carry in death than she had been in life. In life she had followed, but now Vi was forced to carry her. As Vi struggled under the weight of the child going back to the trailer, a need for a concrete answer blossomed in her chest. “Why did you leave us?”

His broad smile narrowed, and he moved the dirt of his foremothers in a circle with his foot. “She kept telling me to.”

Vi shook her head. This was not the truth. “Cecilia told me that one day she woke up and you were gone.”

He nodded. “She would tell me to leave in her sleep. In the morning she would never remember saying it, but I could never forget hearing it. So one morning I did what she couldn’t bring herself to ask me to do in the light of the day.”

Vi had to stop walking under the weight of the dead child in her arms. “What about the first baby?”

His eyebrow moved together. “What?”

“The baby she had before me.”

“Vi you are our only child. She had no children before you.”

VI looked down at the child she was carrying in her arms. Who was this if not Cecilia’s first child? Who was she carrying? Hot tears began to run down Vi’s face as she picked up her pace. The clearing where she’d left Blue Thunder was right ahead.

“Slow down Viola. You have to think about your baby.”
She got in the car and wiped the tears away, leaving thick bands of dust down both side of her face. “She’s all I ever think about.”

HWY 90 was a lonely road. Blue Thunder crept along, headed out of Elysia back to where? She didn’t know where she was going, but at least she knew where she was coming from. Was that enough? It was not enough to keep the child fed, or to keep her from trying to destroy herself. A sign pointing toward Quincy grew up out of the cattails. She made the turn without thinking. It was somewhere, and it was in front of her. She pushed the gas pedal to the floor, and Elysia disappeared in her rearview window.

The pain started and stopped before she reached Hwy 19. Her problem was both new and old. Old: what do with the child? New: what to do with the dead child? Vi tried not to see the emaciated and limp representation of the baby’s former self that lay in the passenger seat. The pain started and stopped again. She had to find a place for her; a place where girl children were not burned and discarded; a place where walls were not only designated for carriers of the familial name. She wanted this child to be remembered. She wanted her presence to be marked. So Vi and Blue Thunder and the dead dream/memory child sped down Hwy 19 until she was turned onto a unmarked but now more familiar road. She drove by Crazy Mary’s shack. Were those flowers always there? She sped past Big Ron’s house up on the hill. She didn’t even have to steer. It was as if Blue Thunder knew the way. They had to stop before they reached the red oak. The pain radiating down the small of her back was like the ebb and flow of lake Michigan banging against the shore in the Spring. She got them out of the car and headed for the cemetery. Just as she would brace herself against the unendurable it would ease, and they could move
forward. She wasn’t sure how long it took them to get to Cemetery. It felt like hours, because the respites were getting shorter each time and the pain getting longer. She bit down on her tongue to keep from screaming. Night had fallen and the cool breeze made carrying the child and the pain easier. By the time she’d entered the gates of Ronnie’s ancestral resting place the ebb and flow had given way to constant the pain. It pressed down on the small of her back and bowels. She wanted to squat and ease the pressure, but she had to bury the child first. She laid the child’s body at the foot of the oak and crawled to a soft patch of unmarked earth. She had nothing but her hands, so she used them to dig. The pain nor the pressure eased, but she didn’t stop digging. She had managed to carve a small space in the soil. She placed the child in it face up. She looked peaceful in death. She buried the paper with her, the one that Diana had thrown at her as proof of her peoplelessness. The headstones looked the same. Except for the fresh flowers that peppered each grave. Were those lilacs? Cecilia’s favorite flower. The pain cut her off from her own thoughts. She kneeled in the spot that Ronnie had showed her months before. She didn’t know how or who to pray to. Were ancestors interchangeable? Could she as easily substitute Ronnie’s for her own? She had tried with Perry. But Perry had never given them to her. Ronnie had. She placed her palms together, but the pain pushed her into a squat. There was something inside of her that needed to come out, and no matter how she wanted to render it invisible it was going to be seen. She squatted and pushed. All she needed now was a headstone. A way to mark this body as belonging to her, but pain and sound cut through her need.

“Vi! Vi!”

It was a voice all at once known and unknown. Cecilia. Now she had moved past imagining the imaginary. Now she was imagining the real. “Are your real?”
The sound and sight combined and Cecilia was kneeling in the dirt next to her. Was she imagining this? “You are not real. This is not real.”

Cecilia laughed a laugh that was all at once familiar and not. “Of course this is really me.” A woman with Ronnie’s face moved forward, and Vi could see who she wasn’t more clearly.

“Crazy Mary?”

She snorted in response. “My friends just call me Mary. Can you walk?”

The pain bent Vi over.

Mary turned to someone she could not see. “It looks like it’s too late to move her. Do you have some blankets?”

Vi could hear footsteps moving away. She assumed that the one that retreated was Big Ron, because Ms. Esther appeared at Vi’s feet, while Mary cradled her from behind her, forming a resting place with her body.

“Your momma is sure gone be glad to see you.”

“Cecilia? She’s here.”

Ms. Esther spread Vi’s legs open. “Left a few hours ago. Came by the house looking for you.”

“Cecilia?” Vi could feel Mary’s heartbeat through her back. “I need to push.”

Ms. Esther looked over Vi’s shoulder and nodded at both of them. “Go ahead Baby. Push.”

Vi pushed with everything she had been holding onto. She pushed as if expelling every pretense and secret, and the pain eased. And just like that, the one that she had been rendering invisible came into her vision.

Cecilia was here and not here. What would Cecilia After say? The child cried out in a way that she had not become accustomed to. It wasn’t the cry of the child she’d just buried, but the closeness was just as disturbing. Cecilia was not here, and this was not a dream. Ms. Esther
placed the baby on Vi’s chest, and something got stuck in her chest. From behind Mary guided
the child’s rooting lips onto Vi’s breast. The screams of hunger that had haunted Vi for months
were instantly replaced with the sound of contented suckling.

Mary touched the child’s head. “What you gone call her?”

“What?”

“Her name baby. What’s her name?”

Vi shook her head. There was no room for names. She held the child in her arms, as both
breasts began to fill with milk. She was the smallest thing that Vi had ever seen. The edges of the
question around her heart soften as her milk came down.
EPILOGUE

Lana had made such a fuss over the tub. She had wanted running water. She had not wanted the work of her childhood. As children, they had been forced to move the water from the well to the tub like mules. Only one bath every 2 weeks because of the trouble, then the sharing of the bath between all of them. Washing in the filth of other’s was worse than not washing at all. He had made sure that she had her tub, and that her children would know the luxury of both daily and singular baths. They would not have to stew in the stink of others. They would wash alone.

“I’m clean mommy.” Her Cecilia had managed to splash more water on the bathroom floor than in the tub.

“That’s Enough Cecilia. I’ve told you ten times already. Out of the tub. You’re getting water everywhere?”

“Please. Second chance. Mommy. Please.” She balled up her chubby cheeks in the way that Lana had never been able to resist.

“Okay Cecie. Second chance. But then we’re going to have to empty the tub for Baby Violet.”

Her Cecilia continued to splash in the water until the suds were a foam on the surface. She pulled the plug and watched the water turn into a swirl at the center of the spout. It was her favorite part of the bath. “Look Mommy. Where does the water go?”

“Somewhere deep under the city, and out into the lake. Now let’s run the water for the baby.”

“Baby Violet’s turn?”

“Yes. Cecie. It’s baby’s turn.” Lana grabbed the baby from the playpen. She was as fat and as beautiful as Cecilia. Everyone always commented on how they had made two beautiful girls. She
placed the baby in the tub, and began to run the water. Was that the bell ringing? Had he
forgotten his key again? The bell rang again. This time more persistently. She pushed herself up
from her knees and twisted the water spigot off. “Cecie, keep and eye on baby sister while
momma let’s Daddy in.”

“Okay Momma.” Cecilia kneeled next to the tub, and began to blow bubbles at her little
sister.

Lana smiled as she went to the front door. “Why do you keep forgetting your key? This is
starting to get…”

The man on the other side of the door wasn’t her man at all. He wore a broad smile and
carried a briefcase. He was selling something that she neither needed or wanted. Just as she was
going to tell him, her Cecilia interrupted.

“Momma. Come see. Baby sister is in the water.”

“Of course she is Cecie. Keep and eye on her for me. No splashing. Okay.”

“Ohkay?”

She smiled as she watched Her Cecilia skip back toward the bathroom. Her smile must have
given the salesman of nothing she wanted or needed renewed hope, because he restarted his sales
pitch with new vigor.

By the time she was able to close the door, Lana could hear running water and splashing
from the bathroom. She moved quickly toward the door. A small stream of water met her in the
hallway. She was sure she had closed the spigot before she’d gone to the door. But when she
opened the bathroom door the water had flowed over the edges of the tub. At first Lana thought
it was a doll that her Cecilia had placed in the tub for Baby Violet to play with. But as she
focused, and then refocused she realized that it wasn’t a doll floating on top of the water, as Cecilia splashed in the tub’s overflow.

It was as if she was moving in slow motion when she lifted Baby Violet out of the water, and held her to her chest.


Lana wanted to scream, but the only thing that kept coming to her head was the fuss she had made over having running water.
VITA

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Anthologies and Magazines:

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PUBLIC READINGS
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