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THE ELEVENTH **DAY: KATRINA**

(pp. 215-136)

When mama first explained to me what a hurricane was, I thought that all the animals ran away, that they fled the storms before they came, that they put their noses to the wind days before and knew. That maybe they stuck their tongues out, pink and warm, to taste, to make sure. That the deer looked at their companions and leapt. That the foxes chattered to themselves, rolled their shoulders, and started off. And maybe the bigger animals do. But now I think that other animals, like the squirrels and the rabbits, don't do that at all. Maybe the small don't run. Maybe the small pause on their branches, the

pine-lined earth, nose up, catch that coming storm air that would smell like salt to them, like salt and clean burning fire, and they prepare like us. The squirrels pack feathers, pack pine straw, pack shed fur and acorns from the oaks in the bowels of their trees, line them so that they are buried deep in the trunks, so safe they can hardly hear the storm cracking around them. The rabbits stand in profile, shank to shank, smell that storm smell that hits them all at once like a loud sound, and they tunnel down through the red clay and the sand, down until the earth turns black and cold, down past all the roots, until they have dug great halls so deep that they sit right above the underground reservoirs we tap into with our wells, and during the hurricane, they hear water lapping above and below while they sit safe in the hand of the earth.

Last night, we laid sleeping pallets in the living room, whose windows we'd lined with mismatched wood. Randall and I, side by side, on the floor, and Junior on the couch. We brought our own limp pillows, our flat and fitted sheets, and our old electric blankets short-circuited cold long ago. We piled them to create mattresses so flimsy we could feel the nubby carpet on the floor underneath us when we sat. We washed all the dishes. We filled the bathtub, the kitchen and the bathroom sinks to the brims with water that we could use for washing and flushing the toilet. We ate a few of the boiled eggs, and Randall cooked noodles for all of us. We balanced the hot bowls in our laps and watched TV. We took turns picking shows. Randall watched a home improvement show where a newlywed couple converted a room

in their house from an office into a mint-green nursery. I chose a documentary on cheetahs. Junior picked last, and once there were cartoons on the screen, even after Junior fell asleep, we let them turn us bright colors in the dark. Daddy stayed in his room, but he left the door open. Skeetah stayed in his room with China and the puppies, but that door was closed.

Before I fell asleep, in the flickering light from the television and one dusty lamp, I read. In ancient Greece, for all her heroes, for Medea and her mutilated brother and her devastated father, water meant death. In the bathroom on the toilet, I heard the clanking of metal against metal outside, some broken machine tilting like a sinking headstone against another, and I knew it was the wind pushing a heavy rain.

On the day before a hurricane hits, the phone rings. When Mama was living, she picked it up; it is a phone call from the state government that goes out to everyone in the area who will be hit by a storm. Randall has answered it since we lost Mama; he lets it play at least once each summer. Skeetah answered once and hung up before the recording could get beyond the *hello*. Junior never has picked it up, and neither has Daddy. I picked it up for the first time yesterday. A man's voice speaks; he sounds like a computer, like he has an iron throat. I cannot remember exactly what he says, but I remember it in general. *Mandatory evacuation. Hurricane making landfall tomorrow. If you choose to stay in your home and have not evacuated by this time, we are not responsible. You have been warned. And these could be the consequences of*

your actions. There is a list. And I do not know if he says this, but this is what it feels like: *You can die.*

This is when the hurricane becomes real.

The first hurricane that I remember happened when I was nine, and of the two or three we get every year, it was the worst I've ever been in. Mama let me kneel next to the chair she'd dragged next to the window. Even then, our boards were mismatched, and there were gaps we could peer out of, track the progress of the storm in the dark. The battery-operated radio told us nothing practical, but the yard did: the trees bending until almost breaking, arcing like fishing line, empty oil drums rattling across the yard, the water running in clear streams, carving canyons. Her stomach was big with Junior, and I laid a hand on it and watched. Junior was a

surprise, a happy accident; she'd had me and Skeetah and Randall a year apart each, and then nothing else for nine years. I kneeled next to her and put my ear to her stomach and heard the watery swish of Junior inside her, as outside the wind pulled, branch by root, until it uprooted a tree ten feet from the house. Mama watched with her eye to the slit formed by the board over the window. She rocked from side to side like the baby in her would not let her sit still. She stroked my hair.

That storm, Elaine, had been a category 3. Katrina, as the newscaster said late last night after we settled in the living room, echoing Daddy, has reached a category 5.

During Elaine, Randall and Daddy had slept. Skeetah had sat on the other side of Mama, opposite me, and she'd told us about the big storm

when she was little, the legend: Camille. She said Mother Lizbeth and Papa Joseph's roof was ripped off the house. She said the smell afterward was what she remembered most clearly, a smell like garbage set to rot, seething with maggots in the hot sun. She said the newly dead and the old dead littered the beaches, the streets, the woods. She said Papa Joseph found a skeleton in the yard, gleaming, washed clean of flesh and clothing, but she said it still stank like a bad tooth in the mouth. She said that Papa Joseph never took the remains down to the church, but carried it in an oyster sack out into the woods; she thought he buried the bones there. She said she and Mother Lizbeth walked miles for water from an artesian well. She said she got sick, and most everybody did, because even then the water wasn't clean, and she

had dreamed that she could never get away from water because she couldn't stop shitting it or pissing it or throwing it up. She said there would never be another like Camille, and if there was, she didn't want to see it.

I fell asleep after everyone else did last night, and now I wake before everyone. Daddy snores so loudly I can hear him from his room. Randall sleeps with his face turned to the sofa Junior is asleep on, his back to me, curved like he hides something. Junior has one arm off the sofa, one leg, and his cover hangs from him. The TV is dead. The house is quiet in a way it never is, its electric hum silent; in our sleep, the arriving storm has put a strangling hand over the house. We've lost power. Through the crack in the living room window, the morning is dark gray and opaque as dirty dishwater. The rain clatters on the

rusty tin roof. And the wind, which yesterday only made itself known by sight, sighs and says, *Hello*. I lay here in the dark, pull my thin sheet up to my neck, stare at the ceiling, and do not answer.

Mama had talked back to Elaine. Talked over the storm. Pulled us in in the midst of it, kept us safe. This secret that is no longer a secret in my body: Will I keep it safe? If I could speak to this storm, spell it harmless like Medea, would this baby, the size of my fingernail, my pinkie fingernail, maybe, hear? Would speaking make it remember me once it is born, make it know me? Would it look at me with Manny's face, with his golden skin, with my hair? Would it reach out with its fingers, pink, and grasp?

The sun will not show. It must be out there, over the furious hurricane

beating itself against the coastline like China at the tin door of the shed when she wants to get out and Skeet will not let her. But here on the Pit, we are caught in the hour where the sun is hidden beyond the trees but hasn't escaped over the horizon, when it is coming and going, when light comes from everywhere and nowhere, when everything is gray.

I lie awake and cannot see anything but that baby, the baby I have formed whole in my head, a black Athena, who reaches for me. Who gives me that name as if it is mine: *Mama*. I swallow salt. That voice, ringing in my head, is drowned out by a train letting out one long, high blast. And then it disappears, and there is only the sound of the wind like a snake big enough to swallow the world sliding against mountains. And then the wind like a train, again, and the house

creaks. I curl into a ball.

"Did you hear that?"

It is Skeetah; I can barely see him. He is only a wash of greater darkness that moves in the dark opening of the hallway.

"Yeah," I say. My voice sounds like I have a cold, all the mucus from my crying lodged in my nose. *A train, Mama said. Camille came, and the wind sounded like trains.* When Mama told me this, I put my nose in her knee. I'd heard trains before when we went swimming on the oyster shell beach, and the train that ran through the middle of St. Catherine would sound loudly in the distance. I could not imagine wind sounding like that. But now I hear, and I can.

"Where's the lamp?"

"On the table," I squeaked. Skeetah walked toward the table, bumping

into things in the half-light, and fumbled the kerosene lantern to light.

“Come on,” Skeetah says, and I follow him to the back of the house, to his and Randall’s room, which seems smaller than it is, and close and hot and red in the light of a smaller kerosene lamp that Skeet must have found in the shed. He shuts the door behind us after eyeing Daddy’s open door. The wind shrieks. Trees reach out their arms and beat their limbs against the house. Skeet sits on his bed next to China, who sprawls and lifts her head to look at me lazily, and who licks her nose and mouth in one swipe. I climb onto Randall’s bed, hug my knees. The puppies’ bucket is quiet.

“You scared?”

“No,” Skeetah says. He rubs a hand from the nape of China’s neck over her shoulder, her torso, her thigh. She

lets her head roll back and licks again.

“I am,” I say. “I never heard the wind sound like that.”

“We ain’t even on the bay. We back far enough up in the trees to be all right. All these Batistes been living up here all these years through all these hurricanes and they been all right. I’m telling you.”

“Remember when Mama told us that the wind sounded like that when Camille hit?” I squeeze tighter. “Elaine wasn’t nothing like this.”

“Yeah, I remember.” Skeetah rubs his fingers under China’s chin, and it is like he is coaxing something from her because she leans toward him and grins, tries to kiss him. “I can remember her saying it.” He stops rubbing China, leans forward to put his elbows on his knees, rubs his hands together, looks away. “But I can’t remember her voice,” he says. “I

know the exact words she said, can see us sitting there by her lap, but all I can hear is my voice saying it, not hers.”

I want to say that I know her voice. I want to open my mouth and have her voice slide out of me like an impression, to speak Mama alive for him as I hear her. But I can’t.

“At least we got the memory,” I say. “Junior don’t have nothing.”

“You remember the last thing she said to you?”

When Mama was birthing Junior, she put her chin down into her chest. She panted and moaned. The ends of her moans squeaked, sounded like bad brakes grinding when a car stops. She never screamed, though. Skeetah and Randall and I were sneaking, standing on an old air-conditioning unit outside her and Daddy’s window, and after she pushed Junior

out, once he started crying, she let her head fall to the side, her eyes like mirrors, and she was looking at us, and I thought she would yell at us to get down out of the window, to stop being nosy. But she didn’t. She saw us. She blinked slow. The skin above her nose cracked and she bit her lip. She shook her head then, raised her chin to the ceiling like an animal on the slaughter stump, like I’ve seen Daddy and Papa Joseph hold pigs before the knife, and closed her eyes. She started crying then, her hands holding her belly below her deflated stomach, soft as a punctured kickball. I had never seen her cry. But she hadn’t said anything, even after Daddy called some of their friends, Tilda and Mr. Joe, to the house to watch us, even after he carried her and Junior out to the truck and she slumped against the window, watching us as Daddy drove away.

Shaking her head. Maybe that meant *no*. Or *Don't worry—I'm coming back*. Or *I'm sorry*. Or *Don't do it. Don't become the woman in this bed, Esch*, she could have been saying. But I have.

"No," I say. "I don't remember."

"I do," Skeetah says, and he props his chin on his fists. "She told us she loved us when she got into the truck. And then she told us to be good. To look after each other."

"I don't remember that." I think Skeetah is imagining it.

"She did." Skeetah sits up, leans back in the bed again, and lays a still hand on China's neck. She sighs. "You look like her. You know that?"

"No."

"You do. You not as big as her, but in the face. Something about your lips and eyes. The older you get the more you do."

I don't know what to say, so I half

grimace, and I shake my head. *But Mama, Mama always here. See?* I miss her so badly I have to swallow salt, imagine it running like lemon juice into the fresh cut that is my chest, feel it sting.

"Did you hear that?"

"What?" I sound stuffed again. Leaves slap the roof in great bunches. The rain is heavy, endless, hits the roof in quick crashing waves. At least the wind doesn't sound like a train again.

"That," Skeetah says, his head to one side, his ear cocked toward the window. His eyes gleam in the light of the lamp. He stands up, and China stands up with him, ears straight, tail pointed, tongue gone. Somewhere out in the storm, a dog is barking.

"Yeah," I say, and then all three of us are at the window, peering out of

the light edge left by the boards. We hear the dog but can't see it; what we do see is the pines, the thin trees bending with the storm, bending almost to breaking. Even the oaks are losing leaves and branches in the gray light, the beating rain. The dog barks loudly, fast as a drum, and something about the way the bark rises at the end reminds me of Mama's moans, of those bowing pines, of a body that can no longer hold itself together, of something on the verge of breaking. The high notes are little rips. It circles the house, its bark near and far. Is it one of Junior's mutts, his mangy family member, seeking shelter, the cool bottom of a house and a knobby-kneed boy and no rain?

"We can't." Skeetah leans toward the window as if he could push his way through the glass and board and save that invisible dog, who for him,

I know, must be China. She drops from where she has been standing on her hind legs with her paws pressed against the wall and leans into Skeetah's side, head-butts his thigh, her smooth white head and floppy ears as soft as the swaddling blankets that Daddy brought Junior home in after he returned from the hospital and Mama didn't. *This your little brother. Claude Adam Batiste the second. Call him Junior.* And then, *Your mama didn't make it.* The searching dog barks one last time before the rain and wind tighten like a choke collar and silence him. China growls in answer, but swallows it when Skeetah kneels before her, takes her face in his hands, and smooths her ears back so that her eyes are slits and she grins and her skin pulls tight and her head could be a naked skull.

China squeals and jumps up into a bark, skitters back and forth across Skeetah's bed, over his knees; this is what makes me look up from my crouch on Randall's bed, from my stomach, from me trying to burrow into myself, to safety. China looks to the ceiling, her teeth gleaming in the dark, ripping barks.

"China, what's ...?" Skeetah reaches out to grab her, to stop her from curling and running, and there is a loud, deafening boom. When it comes, China leaps from Skeetah's bed and rushes to the door as if she would rip the wood to splinters with her teeth. Skeetah yanks the door open, and Randall is running into Daddy's room with a lantern, Junior clinging to his waist while the wind yells outside and the house shudders. There was no need for the lamp; there is a hole in the ceiling in Daddy's room, the trunk

and branches of a tree tossing in the opening. It is a large bush growing wrong. China barks, her nose to the wind.

"Daddy!" Randall runs forward into the wind and rain streaming through the gaping hole, the gray day fisting through it. Daddy is on his knees in front of the dresser, pushing an envelope down his pants. He stands and sees us.

"Go on!" Daddy says. He waves at us, the bandage on his wounded hand flashing light. He is slack and then tight like a clothesline catching in the wind, and he shoves us out of the ruined room and into the hallway, pulling the door shut behind him. Junior will not let go of Randall.

"We'll stay in the living room." Daddy says this as he slumps over on the sofa, pushing his head back into the cushion like Mama pushed hers

back into the pillow, baring his neck.
He's blinking too much.

"Your hand," Randall says.

"It's fine," says Daddy. "We going to stay here until the storm's over."

"When you think?" Skeetah asks.

"A few hours."

China squeals and barks again.

"She knew," I say.

"Knew what?" Daddy's face is wet, and I don't know whether it is water or sweat.

"Nothing," Skeetah says.

"About the tree," I say at the same time. Skeetah rubs China's neck, and she gives a swallowed growl and sits, lays her head along Skeetah's thigh and up his hip, her nose to him.

"She didn't know nothing," Skeetah says, and then he and China step as one, a new animal, toward the light opening of the hallway where the wind whistles in a thin sheet under

Daddy's door. They are going back to Skeetah and Randall's room.

"Come in the living room, Skeet," Daddy says. He rolls his eyes, closes them. Bares his teeth. "Please."

I pick my blankets up, wrap them around me, and sit where I had lain. Skeetah walks back in with China, sets the bucket and China's food and leashes and toys in the corner of the living room farthest away from Daddy, next to the TV. Skeetah lays his blanket against the corner, makes a chair, and China drapes herself across his lap, long and white, and lays her head along her paw and begins licking the pink pads of her feet. Skeetah rubs her, sets his small kerosene lamp down, and in the half-dark, China gleams butter yellow with the flame.

“Junior,” Randall says, “I know you ain’t pee yourself.”

Junior leans over, touches the ground beneath his butt, his face in his thighs.

“I didn’t do that.”

“Then why it’s all wet over here?”

We have been sitting in the living room, terrified and bored. I’m trying to read by the oil lamp, but the sound of the words are not coming together over the sound of the wind and the rain relentlessly bearing down on the house; they are fragments. Jason has remarried, and Medea is wailing. *An exile, oh God, oh God, alone. And then: By death, oh, by death, shall the conflict be decided. Life’s little day ended.* I shut the book, don’t even mark my place, and sit on it. I am cold. Skeetah and China look like they’ve fallen asleep, his hand on her flank and her breastbone on his knee, but when

Randall says this, their eyes open to slits at the same time. The half deck of UNO cards that Randall had been attempting to teach Junior how to play stick to the floor around Junior’s legs. I shrug out of my covers; the thin stream of air that whispers from under Daddy’s door brushes past me like a boy in a school hallway, insistent and brusque, and *Why are my shorts wet? Is it gone? Am I bleeding? Shouldn’t I be cramping?* I stand. The floor underneath me is dark.

China rolls to her feet, her teeth out, and Skeetah grabs her by her scruff as she lunges. He holds her still. He stands, looking calmly about the room.

“It’s water. It’s coming in the house,” Skeetah says.

“Ain’t no water coming in the house. Wood just getting a little damp from the rain,” Daddy says.

"It's coming up through the floor," says Skeetah.

"Ain't nowhere for it to come from." Daddy waves at the room, waves like he's stopping one of us from giving him something he doesn't want: his antibiotics, a letter from a teacher, a school fund-raising brochure.

"Look," Randall says, and he walks over to the window facing the street and bends like an old man, peering out. "Lot of trees on the road."

"But you don't see no water," Daddy says.

"No."

Skeetah and China walk past Junior, who stands where Randall left him in front of the sofa. Junior is picking up each foot, setting it down; he looks at the bottoms as if he cannot believe that he has feet and that they are wet. He pulls his shorts away from him, but they stick anyway. Skeetah

peers out of the window, with China next to him.

"There," Skeetah says. Randall and I run to the window at Skeetah's side, but Junior is there first, and we are all over each other, our feet wet, the carpet a soaked sponge where we stand, Daddy looking at the window like it isn't boarded up, like he can see through it.

There is a lake growing in the yard. It moves under the broken trees like a creeping animal, a wide-nosed snake. Its head disappears under the house where we stand, its tail wider and wider, like it has eaten something greater than itself, and that great tail stretches out behind it into the woods, toward the Pit. China barks. The wind ripples the water and it is coming for us.

There is water over my toes.

"The Pit," Randall sighs.

Daddy gets up then, walks slowly over to the window, each bone bent the wrong way in each joint. Randall moves so Daddy can see out of the crack.

“No,” Daddy says.

I shift, and the water licks my ankles. It is cold, cold as a first summer swim. China barks, and when she jumps down from the window and bounces, there is a splash.

“Daddy?” Randall says. He puts his arm over Junior, who, cringing with his eyes wide, hugs Randall’s leg. But for once, Randall’s arm doesn’t look like metal, like ribbon, like stone; it bends at the elbow, soft, without muscle, and looks nothing but human.

“Daddy!” Junior squeals, but he buries his face in Randall’s hip, and Randall’s hip eats the end of the word. Junior rises an inch or so; he must

be on his toes. The water is up to the middle of my calf.

“Look,” I say.

There is something long and dark blue between the trees. It is a boat. Someone has come to save us. But then I squint and the wind lags clear for one second, and it is not a boat, and no one has come to save us. It is Daddy’s truck. The water has picked it up, pushed it from the Pit. The snake has come to eat and play.

“Your truck,” Skeetah says.

Daddy begins to laugh.

The snake has swallowed the whole yard and is opening its jaw under the house.

“Open the attic,” Daddy says.

The water is lapping the backs of my knees.

“It’s stuck,” Randall says. He is pulling at the string that hangs from

the door of the attic, which is in the ceiling of the hallway.

“Move,” says Skeetah.

The water is tonguing its way up my thighs. Skeetah hands me the puppies’ bucket.

“Hurry,” Randall says.

The three puppies squeal little yips that sound like whispered barks. These are their first words.

“Pull down,” Daddy says. He frowns, holds his hand up like he is pulling the cord.

The water slides past my crotch, and I jump.

“All right!” Skeet yells. He pulls himself up on the cord, like he is swinging from a swing rope in a tree, and the attic door groans downward.

“Up!” Randall says, and he is shoving Junior up the ladder into the attic. China is swimming next to Skeetah, her head bobbing like a buoy.

“Go!” Skeetah says, and he pushes me toward the ladder. I float on the water, my toes dragging on the hallway carpet. He grabs my back and steadies me as I slog into the attic with the bucket.

“Esch!” Junior says.

“I’m here.” Junior’s eyes are white in the dark. The wind beats the roof, and it creaks. Randall is next, then Daddy, and last, Skeetah and China. I cup the bucket with my knees, sit on a pile of boxes, fish out a broken ornament that is digging into my thigh. Christmas decorations. Randall is sitting on an old chain saw, Junior cowering next to him. Daddy takes out the package he put in his pants after the tree fell into his room. It is a clear plastic bag. He opens the packet, pulls out pictures. Just before Skeetah pulls shut the attic door, seals us in darkness, Daddy makes as if he

would touch one of the pictures, hesitant, as lightly as if he is dislodging an eyelash, but his glistening finger stops short, and he wraps the pictures again and puts them in his pants.

Mama.

The attic door moans shut.

The roof is thin; we can hear every fumbling rush of the wind, every torrent of rain. And it is so dark that we cannot see each other, but we hear China barking, and her bark sounds like a fat dog's, so deep, like dense cloth ripping.

"Quiet, China!" Skeetah says, and China shuts her jaw so quickly and so hard, I can hear the click of her teeth shuttering together. I put my face down in the bucket; the puppies do not hear. They mewl still. I feel them with my hand, still downy, their coats just now turning to silk, and they

squirm at my touch. The white, the brindle, the black and white. They lick for milk.

"The house," Randall says, and his voice is steady, calm, but I can hardly contain the panic I feel when the house tilts, slowly as an unmoored boat.

"It's the water," Skeetah says. "It's the water."

"Shit!" Daddy yells, and then we are all bracing in the dark as the house tilts again.

"Water," I say.

"It never came back here." Daddy breathes. "The damn creek."

"Daddy," I say, and I'm surprised at how clear my voice is, how solid, how sure, like a hand that can be held in the dark. "Water's in the attic."

The water is faster this time; it wraps liquid fingers around my toes, my ankles, begins creeping up my

calves. This is a fast seduction. The wind howls.

“There was a family ...,” Randall says.

“We know,” Daddy says. Fourteen of them drowned in Camille. In their attic. The house lifts up off of its bricks again, and rocks.

“We’re not drowning in this fucking attic,” Skeet says, and I hear a banging, again and again. I look up and debris falls in my eyes. He is beating at the inside of the roof. He is making a way.

“Move,” Randall says. “Junior, go by Esch.” And I feel Junior’s little pin fingers on my wrists, and he bangs into something, and he is a monkey on top of the bucket, locked to my lap. “I got it.”

Randall is swinging something in the dark, and when it crashes into the roof, it makes a dent, a chink of light.

He bashes the wood, grunts. Whatever he swings is making a hole. He swings it again, and the wood opens to a small hole no bigger than my finger, and I see that he is swinging the chain saw, hitting the roof with the blunt end.

“Any gas”—Randall bashes—“in here?”

“Can’t remember,” Daddy yells. The storm speaks through the hole, funnels wind and rain through. We squint toward it. The water is over my crotch. The house lists.

Randall cranks once, twice. He pulls the cord back a third time and it catches, and the saw buzzes to life. He shoves it through the finger-wide opening, cuts a jagged line, draws it back out, cuts another jagged line, a parenthesis, before it chugs to a stop. He tries to crank it again, but it will not start. He swings it instead,

an awkward hammer, and the wood cracks, bends outward. He swings again, and the closed eyelid he drew with the cutting saw, with the blows, flutters, and the roof opens. The storm screams, *I have been waiting for you*. Light floods the flooded attic, close as a coffin. Randall grabs Junior, who swings around and clings to his back, his small hands tight as clothespins, and Randall climbs out and into the hungry maw of the storm.

It is terrible. It is the flailing wind that lashes like an extension cord used as a beating belt. It is the rain, which stings like stones, which drives into our eyes and bids them shut. It is the water, swirling and gathering and spreading on all sides, brown with an undercurrent of red to it, the clay of the Pit like a cut that won't stop leaking. It is the remains of the yard,

the refrigerators and lawn mowers and the RV and mattresses, floating like a fleet. It is trees and branches breaking, popping like Black Cat firecrackers in an endless crackle of explosions, over and over and again and again. It is us huddling together on the roof, me with the wire of the bucket handle looped over my shoulder, shaking against the plastic. It is everywhere. Daddy kneels behind us, tries to gather all of us to him. Skeetah hugs China, and she howls. Daddy's truck careens slowly in the yard.

Skeetah is hunched over, picking at his jeans. He takes off his pants, tries to hold them still in front of him; the legs whip in the wind. He shoves China's back legs into the crotch, and then he flings one pant leg over his shoulder, and the other he tucks under his underarm.

"Tie it!" Skeetah yells.

I tie it in a knot. My fingers are stiff and numb. I pull the wet fabric as hard as I can, test it. China's head and legs are smashed to his chest, pinned under the fabric. She is his baby in a sling, and she is shaking.

"Look!" Skeet says and points. I follow his finger to the hollow carcass of Mother Lizbeth and Papa Joseph's house. The top half and the eaves of the house are above water. "It's on a hill!" Skeetah screams.

"How are we going to get there?" Randall yells.

"The tree!" Skeetah is inching down the roof to a spreading oak tree that touches our house and stretches to MaMa's house. It rises like a jungle gym over the seething water. "We're going to climb the tree!"

"No!" Daddy yells. "We're going to stay here!"

"What if the water keeps coming?"

Randall asks. "Better for us to take that chance than stay here and drown!"

Junior's teeth are sealed together, his lips peeled back. His eyes are blasted open. As Randall picks his way down the roof toward the branch, Junior looks back. Randall braces an arm across his chest, holds Junior's arm.

"Just like the first time we swam in the pit, Junior! Hold on!" Randall crouches at the edge of the roof with Skeetah, both of them hunched like birds, feathers ruffled against the bad wind, both of them holding their bundles closely. Skeetah leaps.

He catches the closest ricocheting branch, lands half in and half out of the water. China yelps and begins to struggle, but Skeetah grips her harder with one arm and pulls himself

down the branch until it bows to the water. And then he leaps again, for the next whipping branch. He jumps and grabs. I reshoulder my bucket, pick my way toward the edge. The wind flattens me down to the roof. Randall leaps, lands on the same close branch with his stomach, his arms iron again, binding Junior to him. Both Skeetah and Randall scramble along the half-naked branches of the oak with one arm and both legs, using the limbs to pull themselves and their burdens until they reach water, when they kick their feet, scoot back up the branch, and leap for the next whipping limb. Randall stops, braces himself on the branch, looks back.

“Come on!” he yells.

I grip the tin with my toes, my fingers, crouched on my haunches at the edge of the roof. Readjust the bucket. My heart is a wounded bird, beating

its wings against the cage of my ribs. I don't think I can breathe.

“Jump,” Daddy says.

I lean out and leap.

The hurricane enfolds me in its hand. I glide. I land on the thickest branch, the wood gouging me, the bucket clanging, unable to breathe, my eyes tearing up. I scramble at the wood, pull myself along the branch, my feet in and out of the water, the steel handle to the bucket digging into my shoulder, my living burden already so heavy. The bare bones of Mother Lizbeth's house are so far away; I do not know if I can carry it that far. I inch to the end of the branch where it plunges beneath the water to join the trunk of the tree, and I dig in with my hands and feet. Clutch. Jump. Catch the next branch, where Randall is waiting. The branches we are grasping and

grabbing shudder, twist in the water and air. The little branches whip like clotheslines come unpinned. It is an animal, alive, struggling against the water, trying to shove us off its back.

I look back to see Daddy hurtling through the air. He hits the branch so hard with his torso that his body jackknifes and his face is almost in the water. He is shocked still; he's knocked the wind out of himself. He looks up at us, blinks. Whispers it, but we cannot hear it, only see it. *Go*.

Skeetah has worked his way to the middle of the tree, which buds out of the water, and he is swimming and thrusting from branch to branch. We follow him through the whipping branches, the undulating water. Through plastic bags that skim the surface of the flood like birds. Through the clothesline that knots the branches like fishing net.

Through our clothes, swept from the flooded house. Through the plywood, ripped from the windows, pried away by the teeth of the storm. Through the rain that comes down in curtains, sluicing against Daddy's lazily spinning truck, the detritus, until we cluster at the end of the farthest-reaching branch, the one closest to the grandparents' house. We clutch each other and the swaying branches. China is pawing at Skeetah's breast, snapping her head back and forth. She is jerking away from him, and he clutches her with one white-tipped hand. The bucket feels like it's tearing the skin on my shoulder, feels like I'm carrying three grown dogs instead of three puppies. Where barely the top of the tree had been visible at our house, the branches here are clearly above the flood. The water here comes up to the middle of the closest

window: the house must have been built on a small hill, and we never noticed it.

“I’ma swim, break the window. Y’all come in,” Skeetah says.

“Hurry,” Randall says.

“Esch, you come with me!” Skeetah says.

“This ain’t the time!” Daddy yells.

“This ain’t about the puppies!” Skeetah squints at me.

“She too small!” Daddy hollers. He grabs my free elbow with his good hand. Grips.

“She’s pregnant.” Skeetah points.

Daddy’s face shuts, and he pushes.

Daddy saw it, that second before he pushed me. My big T-shirt and my shorts fitting me like a second skin, sodden with water. Where I used to be all sharp elbows and thighs straight as pines and a stomach like

a paved road, my wet clothes show the difference. Daddy saw the curve of a waist, the telltale push of a stomach outward. Daddy saw fruit. I’m flailing backward with the bucket, the squeaking puppies. And in that second after he pushes me, Daddy is reaching out with his good hand, his bad hand hooked to the branch he crouches on, his eyes open and hurt and sorry as I haven’t seen him since he handed Junior over to me and Randall, said, *Your mama*—and I kick, grasping at the air, but the hurricane slaps me, and I land in the water on my back, the puppies flying out of the bucket, their eyes open for the first time to slits and, I swear, judging me as they hit.

“Esch!” Randall yells, and Junior tightens his legs like a looping shoestring across Randall’s waist. Randall grips Junior’s shins, those legs thin as

rulers. Randall can't jump in. "Swim!" he screams.

I kick my legs and palm water, but I can barely keep my head above it. It is a fanged pink open mouth, and it is swallowing me.

"Fuck!" Skeetah yells. He looks down at China, who is thrusting up and against his sling.

"Esch!" Junior screams, and the water is dragging me sideways, away from the window, out into the yard, toward the gullet of the Pit. I snatch at the puppy closest to me, the brindle, which is limp in my hand, and shove it down my shirt. The white and the black-and-white have disappeared.

"Fuck!" Skeetah screams. He grabs China's head, whispers something to her as she scrabbles against him. Her teeth show and she jerks backward away from him. She writhes. Her

torso is out of the sling he has made. Skeetah grabs China by the head and pulls and her body comes out and she is scrambling. She flies clear of him, twists in the air to splash belly first in the water. She is already swimming, fighting. Skeetah jumps.

The water swallows, and I scream. My head goes under and I am tasting it, fresh and cold and salt somehow, the way tears taste in the rain. *The babies*, I think. I kick extra hard, like I am running a race, and my head bobs above the water but the hand of the hurricane pushes it down, down again. *Who will deliver me?* And the hurricane says *ssssssshhhhhhhh*. It shushes me through the water, with a voice muffled and deep, but then I feel a real hand, a human hand, cold and hard as barbed wire on my leg, pulling me back, and then I am being pushed up and out of the water, held by Skeet,

who is barely treading, barely keeping me and him afloat. China is a white head, spinning away in the relentless water, barking, and Skeetah is looking from her to me, screaming, *Hurry up! Hurry up!* at Randall, who is breaking what was left of the glass and wood of the window with his hands, his shoulders, his elbows, and diving through, while Junior clings to him close as a shell, and Skeetah is pushing me through the window, his hand a leash loop wrapped too tightly around my arm, his other hand treading, and he is calling, *China, come China*, but she is nowhere, and Daddy is swimming and sinking and jerking toward us, his bad hand flashing, and he is through the window and we are all struggling, grabbing at walls, at broken cabinets, at wood, until Randall stretches his way up to the open ceiling and hauls himself and Junior

into the half-eaten attic, where the hurricane fingers the gaping roof, and Skeet pushes me up and through while Randall almost breaks my wrist with his grip as he hauls me up, and then Skeetah kicks off of something buried under the flood and is up and through the opening, and Daddy is on his back in the water below, treading with one hand and two feet, and Randall is hollering, *Help him!* and Skeet is laying next to the hole in the attic floor, looking at us, his face sick, twisted, and he is reaching a hand down to Daddy, hoisting him up, and the puppy must be dead in my shirt because it is not moving and I pull it out as I cough and cough up the water and the hurricane and the pit and I can't stop and Skeetah is braced, looking out the ravaged roof calling China, watching her cut through the swirling water straight as a water

moccasin into the whipping, fallen
woods in the distance, and Junior is
rocking back and forth, squatting on
the balls of his feet, his hands over his
eyes because he does not want to see
anymore; he is wailing
NoNoNoNoNoNoNoNoNoNoNO.

THE TWELFTH DAY: ALIVE

(pp. 237-258)

We sat in the open attic until the wind quieted from jet fighter planes to coughing puffs. We sat in the open attic until the sky brightened from a sick orange to a clean white gray. We sat in the open attic until the water, which had milled like a boiling soup beneath us, receded inch by inch, back into the woods. We sat in the open attic until the rain eased to drips. We sat in the open attic until we got cold, and the light wind that blew chilled us. We huddled together in Mother Lizbeth's attic and tried to rub heat from each other, but couldn't. We were a pile of wet, cold branches, human debris in the middle of all of the rest of it.

I scooted past Daddy, whose eyes were closed as he mumbled against his maimed hand and his good hand, which were folded like he was praying, past Randall, who still held Junior, who still had his hands over his eyes, to Skeetah. He crouched where the attic's roof was mostly gone, near the front of the long, low half room, and leaned out the gaping absence. He looked like he wanted to jump. I touched him in the middle of his shoulder blades. His skin was warm, hot as if he'd been running, as if the day was blazing bright. He jerked but didn't look back at me as he scanned the boiling water, the trees popping and flying, the old washing machine spinning like a bumper car around the yard, the wind ripping the land away. The wood under me felt wet and spongy, like it wanted to give. I put my legs to either side of

his thighs, scooted up behind him, slid my arms under his armpits, and rested my face on his shoulder.

“I failed her,” he said.

He blinked hard.

“No you didn’t.” I spoke into his neck.

“Yes,” he said. His voice sounded like a rake being dragged over rocks.

“You didn’t fail us,” I said.

He shook his head, and his cheek brushed my forehead. The muscles under his jaw were jumping. He started to shake. I hugged him tighter, held him the way I’d embraced those boys I’d fucked because it was easier to let them get what they wanted instead of denying them, instead of making them see me. My arms had never been so strong.

I squeezed. With my whole body, I squeezed. I could hold him together, but he jerked so hard it felt like he

was trying to shake himself apart, separate at the knuckles, pop loose his ribs, dislocate his shoulders, and dislodge his knees: shudder into nothing, a pile of skin and bone and limp muscle. No Skeet.

“It’s going to be all right,” I said.

The hurricane laughed. A tree, plucked from its branches, hopped across the yard and landed against Daddy’s truck with a crunch, stopped short like it had won a game of hopscotch without stepping out of the lines. The sky was so close I felt like I could reach up and bury my arm in it.

Skeetah squinted into the storm, so I looked with him, searching for anything white, anything in the direction that China had whirled away, swimming furiously, barking. Plastic bags, a broken dryer, an old refrigerator. We could see nothing that held heat like China, nothing fighting. The

hurricane gusted and peeled back a corner of our house, flung tin with a clatter into the air.

"It ain't steady now," I said. "It's easing up." I could see the living room, a messy doll's house. The trees cracked in protest around us. Skeetah hummed.

"China," he said.

The tractor, which had been buried under the water, peeked its head out, the top of its hood appearing from under the water.

"When it gets to the middle of the tires, I'm going," Skeetah said.

I said nothing, just hooked my fingers together, like I could've kept him there in a living chain.

When the first slice of rubber appeared over the rolling water, Skeetah started. He was a school of fish in my arms. The wind gusted and the trees clattered. There was a

whirling sound in the sky, a whistle that was descending and rising, circling. The hurricane groaned, and it was like hearing a million Daddys moan and push back their chairs after eating plates full of fish fried whole, white bread for the bones, beer. The iron at the center of the tire peeked through, and it was an eye opening. Skeetah shrugged out of my embrace all at once: a school of fish exploding around a rock.

"Where you going?" I asked.

Skeetah was already past me, past Randall, in front of Daddy.

"Skeet?" Randall asked. Junior buried his face in Randall's muddy shirt.

Skeetah was at the hole we'd climbed through. The glass in the window had cut his face, his thighs, his chest, and his skin was running red. Then I looked at my arms, Ran-

dall, Junior, Daddy; we were all bleeding, all gashed.

“Boy,” Daddy said.

“I got to find her,” Skeetah said.

“The storm ain’t over.” Daddy rolled to his side, lifted his knees, and settled again as if he was trying to get more comfortable, find purchase to stand up, but none of us could with the bones of the ceiling folding so low.

Skeetah turned in his crouch. All that jumping, stilled. He was one animal again, or at least he thought he would soon be.

“She’s waiting for me,” he said, and jumped down through the ceiling, splashing in the water below.

“Skeet!” Randall yelled.

I looked out of our ragged window, the ripped roof, and saw him wade out into the yard, the water at his waist, his head up, his shoulders back, his arms raised, and his hands

extended palms down inches over the water, as if he could calm it.

“Be careful,” Daddy breathed, and I watched my brother walk almost naked out into the departing storm. He headed toward the Pit, the water swirling around him, the broken tops of the trees, the debris rising like a labyrinth up out of the water. He paused, turned his head, and looked back at us. I waved through the ruined window. The air was getting cold. He turned and vanished around a tree growing sideways, into the maw of the maze. He left a thin wake.

When the water left, the front part of Daddy’s truck was sitting on top of the smashed gas tank. The lower half was on the ground. All the water that had been in the car was out, and it left a muddy slime on the windows. The yard was one big puddle that we

waded, so icy at our ankles, the first cold water we'd felt since the March rains, to the back door of the house, which was blasted open. The screen door was gone. The inside of the house was wet and muddy as Daddy's truck. The food we'd gotten had been washed from the shelves, and we hunted for it like we did for eggs, finding some silver cans of peas. We found Top Ramen, still sealed, in the sofa. We put them in our shirts. My hands were pink with Skeetah's blood from hugging him earlier. I washed them in a puddle in the living room.

"We can't stay here. We need shelter." Randall grimaced. "Your hand, and the water ..." Randall trailed off. "Who knows what the water had in it."

Daddy shook his head, his lips weak as a baby's. He looked dazed. He stared at his truck, the ruined house,

the yard invisible under the trees and the storm's deposits.

"Where," he said, and it was a statement with no answer.

"By Big Henry," Randall said.

Junior was on Randall's back, his eyes finally uncovered and open. He looked drunk.

"What about Skeet?" I asked.

"He'll find us," Randall said.

"Daddy?" He raised an arm to Daddy, flicked his head toward the road.

"Yeah." Daddy cleared his throat.

"We can fix it," Randall said.

Daddy looked down at the ground, shrugged. He glanced at me and shame fluttered across his face like a spider, sideways, fast, and then he looked past the house to the road and started walking slowly, uneven, limping. There was a gash in the back of his leg, bleeding through his pants.

We picked our way around the fallen, ripped trees, to the road. We were barefoot, and the asphalt was warm. We hadn't had time to find our shoes before the hand of the flood pushed into the living room. The storm had plucked the trees like grass and scattered them. We knew where the road was by the feel of the stones wearing through the blacktop under our feet; the trees I had known, the oaks in the bend, the stand of pines on the long stretch, the magnolia at the four-way, were all broken, all crumbled. The sound of water running in the ditches like rapids escorted us down the road, into the heart of Bois Sauvage.

The first house we saw was Javon's, the shingles of his roof scraped off, the top bald; the house was dark and looked empty until we saw someone

who must have been Javon, light as Manny, standing in front of the pile of wood that must have been the carport, lighting a lighter: a flicker of warmth in the cold air left by the storm. At the next nearest house, when the neighborhood started to cluster more closely together, we saw what others had suffered: every house had faced the hurricane, and every house had lost. Franco and his mother and father stood out in the yard looking at each other and the smashed landscape around them, dazed. Half of their roof was gone. Christophe and Joshua's porch was missing, and part of their roof. A tree had smashed into Mudda Ma'am and Tilda's house. And just as the houses clustered, there were people in the street, barefoot, half naked, walking around felled trees, crumpled trampolines, talking with each other,

shaking their heads, repeating one word over and over again: *alive alive alive alive*. Big Henry and Marquise were standing in front of Big Henry's house, which was missing a piece of its roof, like all the others, and was encircled by six of the trees that had stood in the yard but that now fenced the house in like a green gate.

"It's a miracle," Big Henry said. "All the trees fell away from the house."

"We was just about to walk up there and see about y'all," Marquise said.

Big Henry nodded, swung the machete he had in his hand, the blade dark and sharp.

"In case we had to cut through to get to y'all," Marquise explained.

"Where's Skeet?" Big Henry asked.

"Looking," Randall said, hoisting Junior farther up on his back.

"For what?" Marquise asked.

"The water took China," I said.

"Water?" Big Henry asked, his voice high at the end, almost cracking.

"From the creek that feeds the pit." Randall said. "The house flooded through. We had to swim to the old house, wait out the storm in the attic."

I wanted to say: *We almost drowned. We had to bust out of the attic. We lost the puppies and China.*

"We need a place to stay," I said.

"It's just me and my mama," Big Henry said. "Plenty of room. Come on." He flicked the machete blade, threw it to Marquise, who caught the handle and almost dropped it.

"You all right, Mr. Claude?" Big Henry asked Daddy.

Every line of Daddy's face, his shoulders, his neck, his collarbone, the ends of his arms, seemed to be caught in a net dragging the ground.

“Yeah,” Daddy said. “I just need to sit for a while. My hand.” He stopped short. Big Henry nodded, placed one of those big careful hands on Daddy’s back, and escorted us through the milling crowd, the crumbled trees, the power lines tangled like abandoned fishing line, to his home. He looked at me over his shoulder, and the glance was so soft, so tentative and tender, I wanted to finish my story. I wanted to say, *I’m pregnant*. But I didn’t.

Amongst the older women in hair curlers and oversized T-shirts and slippers, the girls in sweatpants and tank tops, the boys riding their bikes, the men gathered in clusters pointing at each other and at the sky, I saw Manny. He was sitting in the back of a white and silver pickup truck parked half in, half out of the road, surrounded by the tops of ripped

trees. He was staring across the crowd at us, and from that far away, he was all muscled shoulders and golden skin and black, black eyes. There were wide smears of mud all across his legs, his chest. He raised one forearm in a short, stiff wave. Randall hunched over next to me, eyeing Daddy’s and Big Henry’s backs.

“Is it him?” he whispered.

I nodded, looked down at the ground.

“I knew you had a crush on him, but—” Randall cleared his throat. “I didn’t think he’d do anything about it.”

“I wanted to,” I said.

“I’m going to beat the shit out of him,” Randall said, the words whistling out of him.

A girl separated herself from the crowd, sat down next to Manny on the truck, laid her head on his

shoulder. Shaliyah. Manny sat there stiffly beside her, still looking at me, at Randall, waiting for a wave, a nod, anything. I slid my fingers into the crook of Randall's elbow, and Junior's leg rubbed the back of my hand. His skin, and Randall's skin, was warm; I walked so that Randall was my shield, my warm cover, my brother.

"No, Randall," I said. "You don't need to. I already did."

Randall snorted, but he didn't let Junior go, and he squeezed his forearm to his waist, folding my arm into his, pulling me with him. We walked to Big Henry's front door together.

Big Henry's mother, Ms. Bernadine, is half Big Henry's size, with wide hips and thin shoulders, and now I know where he gets his careful hands. She settled Daddy on the sofa in the dark, hot house, unwrapped and cleaned and rewrapped his hand in

the light from the open door and the open windows. Her hands were small and quick as hummingbirds, and just as light. She made potted meat sandwiches, and when one of her brothers brought over a small generator, she hooked the refrigerator up to it from an extension cord along with a small fan, and this she put in the window in the living room, and pointed it at Daddy's face, which was gray and twisted.

Marquise had run up to the house to find Skeetah and took his dog along: Lala gleamed like melted butter, untouched by the havoc of the hurricane. He said when he got to the house, Skeetah heard his dog barking and came out of the woods. Skeetah was wearing wet, muddy shorts he'd salvaged from the wreckage, but he was still barefoot. When Marquise tried to get him to come down to Big

Henry's house, he'd asked for Marquise's lighter, said he'd camp out at the house because he was waiting for China to come back. Marquise had argued with him, but Skeetah ignored him, so Marquise left. When Marquise told us the story, he chewed the inside of his cheek, looked ashamed that he hadn't been able to drag Skeetah down into Bois. "He's stubborn," Randall said. "You can't make him do nothing he don't want to do."

That night, when people with working trucks and chains were clearing the streets of trees and burning wet, smoking bonfires, we slept on thin pallets on Big Henry's living room floor, and his mother whispered to Big Henry in the kitchen: "Ain't they one more?"

"Yeah," he said. "He's looking for his dog."

"As long as they need," she said. "At

least they alive."

"Yeah," Big Henry said, and I knew he was looking at us, Junior under my armpit, sweating and twitching in his sleep, Daddy still as a stone on the sofa, Randall laying facedown, his head buried in his folded arms, almost diagonal in the small living room. One or two sodden bugs whirred outside, and I wondered where Skeetah was, saw him sitting before a fire, his head cocked to the night, which had turned hot after the cold air left by the storm passed. Waiting.

Big Henry and his uncle Solly, the one who brought the generator and who is tall and skinny and has blurry home-done tattoos up and down his forearms, are talking in the doorway. The sun has burned away the last of the clouds of the storm's wake. It

arcs through the door, slides past Big Henry, and burns my face.

“That bridge is washed out.”

“The old one over the bayou? The first or second one?”

“The little third.”

“What about the bridge on the east side?”

“That one’s okay. Road’s full of water, they say. But you can drive through it.”

“What it look like?”

Solly clears his throat. Spits.

“It’s bad.” He clears his throat again. “Real bad.” Solly shrugs. “Where your mama say I need to put that tarp again?”

Big Henry leads him outside to show him the bad spot on the roof. He is barefoot, and his feet look white and tender as a baby’s.

“Esch.” Daddy’s voice from the sofa sounds like he has a Brillo pad lodged

in his throat. I turn my head just so I can see his face out of the corner of my eye. This is the way you approach a bristling, unfamiliar dog.

Daddy makes a low humming noise. He sits up, folds his useless hand and his good one over his stomach. Looks at the dead TV.

“What Skeetah said. Is it true?”

I look at the carpet, fuzzy and maroon, that grows fluffy at the edge of the sofa he lays on; no one has ever stepped on it there. I nod, an inch’s slide of my head, into the pillow.

Daddy makes a clicking noise in this throat. Clears it and swallows.

“I shouldn’t have pushed you,” he says.

He rubs his good hand over his face like a cat cleaning its jaw and nose. His nose and cheeks are greasy and shine in the dark. I am quiet,

feel every inhale and exhale like an explosion.

“It ... happened,” Daddy breathes and stops.

I am blinking quickly, a feeling like boiled water splashed over my chest, soaking up my face.

“I’m sorry,” Daddy says.

I want to say, *Yes*. Or *I know*. Or *I’m sorry, too*. But I squeak, small as a mouse in the room. Wonder where the baby will sleep, wonder if it will lay curled up in the bed with me. If I will teach Junior to give it a bottle, the way Daddy taught us. He is old enough now.

“How long has it been?” Daddy asks.

“I don’t know.” My voice is so high it sounds like someone else is talking, like I could turn my face and see another girl there, lying on the floor between her brothers, answering these

question.

“When we can, we need to find out.”

“Yes,” I say, facing him, seeing him folding in on himself, soft where he had been hard, the rigid line of him broken. His helpless hand. Junior will feed the baby, sit on the bed with pillows on both sides to support his arms. He will sit still long enough for that.

“Make sure everything’s okay.”

I nod.

“So nothing will go wrong.”

Daddy is rubbing his pocket with his good hand. I hear the crinkle of plastic. For a moment, Mama is there next to him on the sofa, her arm laid across his lap while she palms his knee, which is how she sat with him when they watched TV together. I wonder if that is phantom pain, and if Daddy will feel his missing fingers

the way we feel Mama, present in the absence. But it is still terrible when Daddy looks up at me again, past my left shoulder to the opening door, and she isn't there.

If it is a girl, I will name her after my mother: Rose. Rose Temple Batiste.

"You want to go to St. Catherine?" Big Henry is talking as he walks through the screen door; his pink feet nudge Randall's head on accident, and Big Henry jumps back and rattles the door frame. Randall looks up sleepily. I palm Junior's head and rub.

"What?"

"I got gas. We can ride. See what it's looking like."

Randall is waking up slowly. He stretches, talks through his yawn.

"We get back, we'll go up to the house and try to find some more food. We know y'all ain't got it to spare."

"We can go get Skeet," I add.

Daddy is shaking his head. The side of his short afro is smashed flat.

"Skeetah ain't going to come," Daddy says. He is gripping the wrist under his bad hand, rubbing at the skin like he could peel it off. The wire that had seemed to line his bones before the accident, before the hurricane, that made him so tall when he stood next to Mama, has softened to string. "I need something for this."

If it is a boy, I will name it after Skeetah. *Jason*. Jason Aldon Batiste.

"We'll find something," Big Henry says. I shake Junior awake. Outside, the sky is blue, clear of clouds.

The bayou formed by the meeting of the river and the bay is as calm as it would be on any summer day, and it is hard to tell the hurricane has been here except for where the wind

dragged the water across the road and left it there. The bayou is where we had thought the water would come from, the reason we thought we were safe, but Katrina surprised everyone with her uncompromising strength, her forcefulness, the way she lingered; she made things happen that had never happened before. Now, all the people from St. Catherine's that had family in Bois Sauvage and had sheltered there during the storm for fear of what the hurricane would do to the towns on the beach, follow each other in a long line across the drowned bayou to their homes. Big Henry stays close to the car in front of him; the road has disappeared in patches, and it is only the bent bayou grass rimming the sunken asphalt that gives us any idea that we are not driving into the water, that Big Henry won't set the car spinning like

Daddy's, set us to sink. The water parts and flutters like a fish's fin away from the tires, and then closes again, muddy. I wonder what the storm has stirred up from the bottom of the bay, and what it has dragged in and left in the warm, mud-dark water.

"Where are the trees?" Junior asks.

In Bois, some stand still: a few young saplings, hardy oak trees low enough to the ground to avoid the worst of the storm, but stripped of all their leaves and half their branches, as naked as if it is the dead of winter. Here in St. Catherine, they have been mown down, and there is too much sky. In Bois, the houses stand, and are ripped and torn in some places, like Skeetah and Rico after the fight, some of them leaning tipsily, like ours, half drowned. Here, there is too much sky. Something turns in my chest, spreads, and drops; it leaves nothing.

The first main road we get to in St. Catherine, the one that runs through the length of the town on the north side so that it is farthest away from the beach, is washed over with mud. The houses that were here are gone, or they have been flipped over on their heads, or they've slid sideways to bump into their neighbors, ripped from their foundations. The high school has been flooded, and the elementary school is smashed flat as a pancake; the power lines that still stand across the street have a four-wheeler hanging from the wire. A parking lot where the owners used to keep eighteen-wheeler truck beds is empty: eight of them are now upside down across the street from the lot, looking like Legos, tossed messily, smashing the trees. What used to be a trailer park looks like a stack of fallen dominoes, and there is one

trailer on top of another trailer on top of another trailer, stacked like blocks. And everywhere there are people, looking half drowned; an old white man and an old black man camping out under a tarp spread under a lone sapling; a family of Vietnamese with sheets shaped into a tent over the iron towing bar used for mobile homes, plywood set under the draping to make a floor; teenage girls and women foraging in the parking lot and hollow shell of a gas station, hunting the wreckage for something to eat, something to save. People stand in clusters at what used to be intersections, the street signs vanished, all they own in a plastic bag at their feet, waiting for someone to pick them up. No one is coming.

"What?" Big Henry says, as if someone has asked him a question.

An older woman sits at the corner of one of the smaller roads that we turn down to get to the main road that runs closer to the beach. She has a towel draped over her head, and the plastic and metal chair she sits in leans to the left. She waves her hand, and we slow down.

“Can’t pass down there. Can’t pass nowhere near down there.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Big Henry says.

“Y’all got any food?” she asks. She is missing her teeth on the side, and she is that in-between color where I can’t tell if she is white or light-skinned black, but I can tell that she is old, the lines of her face rippling outward like her nose, her eyes, and lips were stones dropped in still water.

“Yes,” I say, and I fish out one of the Top Ramen packets we brought with us, pass it to Big Henry in the front seat, who passes it out the window to

her. She grabs it, peers at it, and then starts laughing. Her grin is mostly gums. Her T-shirt has a blue and pink teddy bear on it, and it used to be white.

“Well, all right.” She laughs. “All right.”

Big Henry drives as far as he can, which is only around a hundred feet, before he stops the car, pulls it as far to the side of the road as he can without driving into the ditch, and parks. Mud has splattered up the side of the car, patterned it like lace. Junior is scrambling onto Randall’s back again, and Randall loops and knots his arms under Junior’s legs. Junior’s cheek brushes against Randall’s: I haven’t seen him set Junior down since the hurricane. There is a house sitting in the middle of the road, facing us, like it guards the secrets we will find farther in. We pick our way around it.

There are more houses in the street. One house, square and even as a box, two stories, has been knocked off of its foundation and spun to the side. Another house has landed on another house, wood on brick, and settled. The foundations, cinder blocks, rise up out of the earth, stop a few feet in the air, slim and expectant, robbed of their houses. A woman in a baseball cap picks through the rubble of a spun house; her son, who looks around Junior's age, squats in the dirt near the street and stares, face puckered, as we pass. A man in a yellow T-shirt pokes around his house's foundation with a stick. We pass what used to be the elementary school, the gym where Randall, a few days ago, played for and lost his chance at going to basketball camp and being recognized by a college scout for his talent, for being Randall, where Manny

learned who I was and disowned me, where Skeetah fought for me, and there is nothing but mangled wood and steel in a great pile, and suddenly there is a great split between now and then, and I wonder where the world where that day happened has gone, because we are not in it.

"Shit," Randall breathes. He grips Junior's leg harder, and Junior whimpers but says nothing. "It's all gone," he says.

We stand in our small group, staring at the mess, and then I step away, and we leave, but Randall is the last to start walking, and he glances back again and again at the gym that was there but isn't. Power lines stretch across the mud-clogged road like great lazy snakes; we hop over them. With all the trees gone, it is easy to see that we are approaching the train tracks, the same train tracks that

carried the trains we heard blowing raucously when we were younger, swimming in the same oyster-lined bay that came in and swallowed Bois, swallowed the back of St. Catherine, and vomited it out in pieces. A house sits in the middle of the track. It is yellow, and its windows have been blasted open by the storm, but its curtains remain. They flutter weakly. We climb around it, look east and west along the track, and see many houses lining it: it is a steel necklace with wooden beads.

Beyond the track, there are no beads. No houses stand here. There are only great piles of wood. Sometimes they are all the same color, and that's how we know a house stood here, stood there. There are no foragers here, picking through the rubble. What could be salvaged? What hasn't been buried or swept back out

to sea? The stumps of the trees are raw and ragged, and the plywood from the houses is raw and ragged, and everything has been ripped in half. Closer to the beach, so close I can glimpse it if I squint and look toward the horizon, are oak trees. Some that stood in the park stand still; others have been ripped from the earth, their naked crowns facing the ocean. Those that remain look dead. Narrow streets where dentists' offices were, where restaurants that served catfish and hush puppies were, where veterinarians' offices were, where small dim bookstores and the kinds of antiques stores that I would never dream of walking into for fear of breaking something have been savaged; all the storm left are boards and siding stacked like pancakes flung on plates of concrete slabs.

We reach the end of the road. Here the hurricane has ripped even the road that rimmed the beach away in chunks so there are red clay and oyster shell cliffs. The gas station, the yacht club, and all the old white-columned homes that faced the beach, that made us feel small and dirty and poorer than ever when we came here with Daddy, piled in his truck, for gas or chips or bait on our swimming days, are gone. Not ravaged, not rubble, but completely gone. The hurricane has left a few steel beams, which stick up like stray hairs, from concrete foundations. There are rivers running down the highway that lines the beach. Past that, on the beach, there is a sofa. A man with white hair and an open button-down shirt is sitting on the arm of the sofa, and he is holding his head or he is rubbing his eyes or he

is smoothing his hair or he is crying, and a dog, orange and large in the sun, is sniffing around him in circles, and then it is running and it is barking excitedly at what it has found. A closed black casket. It sniffs, raises its leg, and pees.

“Ain’t nothing left,” Big Henry says.

It is quieter than I have ever heard it in St. Catherine. There is only wind and the flat blue-gray water, which is so tame there isn’t even the loud swish and draw of waves. Big Henry’s voice carries, and the dog looks up toward us and goes back to sniffing his treasure.

“Come on,” Randall says.

Big Henry and I follow him. Junior bobs up and down on Randall’s back, as gently as if he were sitting in a boat on calm water. We tiptoe on the edge of the ravaged road. I am scared more of it will slide. We climb over half of

an oak tree, a car empty as a naked sardine can, what is left of a neon grocery store sign.

“Over here,” Randall says and leads us down one of the side streets, away from the quiet, open expanse of the sea. “Here.”

He jumps up on the concrete slab behind what used to be a bank but is now only the safe, large as an elevator, in the middle of a foundation, and bends to look down in the folds of the concrete.

“Look.”

“The liquor store,” Big Henry says.

“For Daddy,” Randall says, and then we are all on our knees, balancing on the haphazard slabs that rock when we walk, peering under boards, finding glass shards from wine bottles, vodka, gin, gleaming red, dark blue, purple in the shadows. I find a bottle of Mad Dog, lime green,

unbroken. Randall finds an orange one. Big Henry finds a red one, and a small bottle of gin. Junior points and Randall unwedges a big gallon jug of vodka. Big Henry slides two bottles of Mad Dog in his shorts pockets, and I slip the bottle of gin and the orange Mad Dog in Randall’s pants, and he hooks his thumb through his belt loops to hold his pants up. Big Henry grabs the vodka jug. I squat down to look in the hot concrete crevasses again, to find another treasure that I can take back for Skeet, something that will help me tell him the story of what we found, but there is nothing here but broken bottles, smashed signs, splintered wood, so much garbage.

Big Henry squats next to me. Randall is pointing down the street, pointing something out to Junior,

where the library was that he visited with his school once, maybe.

“I heard what you said. When you was talking to your daddy.”

I will have to tell Skeetah as clearly as I can, and he will have to close his eyes and for one second not think of China and listen as I tell him the story of Katrina and what she did to the coast.

“Who the daddy?” Big Henry asks. There is no blazing fire to his eyes, no cold burning ice like Manny’s. Only warmth, like the sun on the best fall days when the few leaves that will turn are starting and the air is clear and cloudless.

“It don’t have a daddy,” I say. I palm a piece of glass, marbled blue and white, blunt at the edges, grab another that is red and a pink brick stone. I slip all three into my pockets. Like Skeetah told me the story of the

last thing that Mama said to us, I will tell him this. *This was a liquor bottle, I will say. And this, this was a window. This, a building.*

“You wrong,” Big Henry says. He looks away when he says it, out to the gray Gulf. There is a car out there in the shallows of the water. The top gleams red. “This baby got a daddy, Esch.” He reaches out his big soft hand, soft as the bottom of his feet probably, and helps me stand. “This baby got plenty daddies.”

I smile with a tightening of my cheek. My eyes feel wet. I swallow salt.

“Don’t forget you always got me,” Big Henry says.

I hold the stones so tight in my fist in my pocket that they hurt. I wish I could tell Big Henry this: *I wish you were there when the water came, you with your big hands, your legs like tree*

trunks sunk in the earth. I lead the way over the ruined ground to Randall and Junior, who watch us approaching.

I will tie the glass and stone with string, hang the shards above my bed, so that they will flash in the dark and tell the story of Katrina, the mother that swept into the Gulf and slaughtered. Her chariot was a storm so great and black the Greeks would say it was harnessed to dragons. She was the murderous mother who cut us to the bone but left us alive, left us naked and bewildered as wrinkled newborn babies, as blind puppies, as sun-starved newly hatched baby snakes. She left us a dark Gulf and salt-burned land. She left us to learn to crawl. She left us to salvage. Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother with large, merciless hands, committed to blood,

comes.

Skeetah's made a clearing in what used to be the yard but is now a tangle of tree branches and wood and car and wire and garbage. Our house looks like it has been painted in mud, slathered dark. It looks tilted wrong by the water. The night wind feels cool only because it is less hot than the day. Ms. Bernadine gave us a big cup of water each for a bath; a shower was wetting the rag in the water, soaping it, stripping in Big Henry's warm tiled blue bathroom that smelled faintly like rotten eggs, soaping my whole body, and then rinsing off with the water from the cup. It was heaven. She unwrapped and washed Daddy's hand, leaned in close, said, *It's a little red.* Daddy had replied, already slurring, *We'll deal with it.* Dinner was sardines and

Vienna sausages, canned corn, dry ramen we ate like crackers, grape and red soda; even after I sucked the last of the sugary hot bite of the soda down, licked the last fish oil from the sardines from my fingernails, I was still hungry. We drove up to the house and had to park the car almost on top of the trees that had been dragged out of the street and left at the side of the road near the ditch.

Skeetah must have found an axe, or maybe he used his bare hands to break the wood; he sits in the middle of the downed trees, his fire big, higher than the fire we barbecued on, so big that the flames leap past the top of his head, burnish him black and gleaming like the glass I found earlier. He sits on an overturned bucket in the circle of mud and dirt that he has made, his elbows on his knees, his eyes intent on the fire. He

wears a pair of jean shorts and tennis shoes, and next to him is a rubber tire, a chain that is the same, dark cloudy gray of the hurricane clouds on top of that. China's things. He has found China's things.

"We brought you some food," I say. He looks up, unsurprised, like he has been expecting us. The whites of his eyes are very white, and he seems more still than I have ever seen him before, as still as if there is some hard stone inside of him, at his center: a concrete foundation left still.

"Thank you," he says. "Your shoes." Skeetah motions to another, smaller pile I had not noticed. A muddy pile of shoes that looks exactly like the kind of pile the puppy China made. "I found them."

We sift through the pile. Skeetah peels open the top of one of the Vienna sausage cans, unties the bag of

saltines, makes a small sandwich, and begins eating. He chews very slowly. Crumbs gather at the corner of his lips, and he licks them away.

“You should come down with us,” Randall says, jamming his foot into his shoe. Junior slides down Randall’s side, a small black shadow. I throw him his shoes. Randall sits in the dirt, and Junior settles in his lap. Randall lets his chin sit on Junior’s bald, sweating egghead.

“We got plenty of room,” Big Henry says. He inhales his cigarello, and the tip lights red. “You could sleep in my room.”

“We’re worried about you.” I say it because they won’t.

Skeetah smiles around the food, shakes his head. He picks up the cream soda we brought him, his favorite, opens it, and takes a sip.

“I’m not going nowhere,” he says.

He eats another cracker sandwich.

The meat smells rich in the dark; the crackers smell like nothing. All of it smells like it is burning because of the smoky fire, which is unbearably hot. I sit next to Skeetah but scoot backward to feel leaves still green and fat on the fallen trees tickle my back. “She’s somewhere out there, and she’s coming back.”

“You didn’t see St. Catherine,” Randall says. “Look like somebody dropped a bomb. Like war.”

“Bois ain’t St. Catherine.” Skeetah frowns for a moment, a dark line like a slash between his eyes, his lips and nose like a puzzle with the pieces fit together wrong, and then his face is smooth and polished again. “She can swim.”

“You can come back up here during the day,” Big Henry suggests.

“No.”

“If she come back, Skeet, ain’t like she going to leave again,” I say.

“Ain’t no *if*.” Skeetah rubs his head from his neck to the crown like his skin is a T-shirt he could pull off and over his skull. Like he could pull who he is off and become something else. Like he could shed his human shape, in the dark, be hatched a great gleaming pit, black to China’s white, and run off into what is left of the woods, follow the line of the creek, and find China sniffing at the bole of an oak tree filled with quivering squirrels, or sniffing at the earth, at the rabbits between the waters. “Not *if*. When.”

When he looks back up at me, he is still again: sand seared to rock.

“She’s going to come back to me,” he says. “Watch.”

We will sit with him here, in the strange, insect-silent dark. We will sit until we are sleepy, and then we will

remain until our legs hurt, until Junior falls asleep in Randall’s arms, his weak neck lolling off Randall’s elbow. Randall will watch Junior and Big Henry will watch me and I will watch Skeetah, and Skeetah will watch none of us. He will watch the dark, the ruined houses, the muddy appliances, the tops of the trees that surround us whose leaves are dying for lack of roots. He will feed the fire so it will blaze bright as a lighthouse. He will listen for the beat of her tail, the padding of her feet in mud. He will look into the future and see her emerge into the circle of his fire, beaten dirty by the hurricane so she doesn’t gleam anymore, so she is the color of his teeth, of the white of his eyes, of the bone bounded by his blood, dull but alive, alive, alive, and when he sees her, his face will break and run water,

and it will wear away, like water does,
the heart of stone left by her leaving.

China. She will return, standing
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tall and straight, the milk burned
out of her. She will look down on the
circle of light we have made in the Pit,

and she will know that I have kept
watch, that I have fought. China will
bark and call me sister. In the star-
suffocated sky, there is a great wait-
ing silence.

She will know that I am a mother.

LIVING THROUGH A CATEGORY FIVE HURRICANE

When you live on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, stories of hurricanes are passed down through generations. For my parents, the storm was called Camille, and on August 17, 1969, it made landfall.

My mother said the windows in her aunt's house shattered, and a tree smashed through the roof. My father told me water flooded his grandmother's house up into the attic, and they swam through the storm under the eaves, feeling the house lift from its moorings and rock like a boat with the waves: He smiled when he said this, but his grin was tight.

The wind sounded like a train, my

mother said every time she told me the story, and even though the metaphor made sense, I couldn't hear it.

My storm was Katrina.

We weren't aware that it would be a Category 5 until the night before it hit. I thought we'd completed our preparations, but it was then that my mother took the extra precaution of wrapping in plastic and packing all the pictures of my brother, who died in a car accident with a drunk driver when he was nineteen. She took the photos and our birth certificates, all her important paperwork—and put them in her trunk. She parked the car away from our mobile home on the highest ground she could find. I should have understood then that this storm would differ from all the other tropical storms and Category 1 and 2 and 3 hurricanes we'd lived through, but I did not.

I did not understand the difference until water swept through the Bay St. Louis and into DeLisle, and then inside the living room of my grandmother's brick house, where we'd taken shelter. It had never flooded in earlier storms, so we thought we would be safe.

The water rose so quickly, we were afraid to climb into the attic. The stories of those who swam like my father, entire families who drowned in attics, terrified us. We did what we could to survive; we went out into the storm, wading through water chest deep, children clinging to our shoulders, and swam and scrambled for higher ground.

And then there was the wind.

It snapped the pine trees around us in two, razed the forest to the south of us. It pulled the weaker trees from the ground by the roots, and it threw them through the air so they snagged

in power lines, on roofs, into other trees.

We sheltered in our cars in a neighbor's yard for much of the storm. The wind shook the trucks so violently it felt like we were convulsing. I thought we would die—that the wind would flip our cars or toss a tree in our direction, which would sweep us away like a broom.

After relentless hours of watching the water surge toward us, our cars sunk to invisibility in the brown swirl, the water receded, and we were able to board a boat and drive to a neighbor's, who offered shelter.

My mother lay down on the floor and put her head in my sister's lap. I sat on the porch, barefoot and shaking. The sky turned orange and the wind sounded like fighter jets. *So that's what my mother meant:* I understood then how that hurricane, like

Camille, had unmade the world, tree
by water by house by person.

Even in language, it reduced us to
improbable metaphor.

—Jesmyn Ward
NPR, *All Things Considered*
November 17, 2011