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Genesis

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genesis

by

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has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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Acknowledgements
Introduction to genesis: a coming into being

My writing tends to revolve around a few central ideas: place, memory, and faith. Place and land are key concepts in this collection, and I have tried to ground most of my poems in a strong sense of place. I grew up in west Tennessee, and since it is the most accessible place in my memory, it is the central location that emerges in my writing. However, it wasn’t until I distanced myself from Tennessee that I gained a more accurate perspective of what I thought of Tennessee. Living in Japan after college and moving to Iowa for graduate school gave me enough distance to take a long look at the Tennessee in which I grew up. I had never noticed specifics of the landscape, never gave much attention to the trees, the fields. All I knew was that whenever I returned from a trip, Tennessee felt like home. But distance brought specific things into perspective. Tennessee became unkempt, overgrown. Nature seemed messy—trees were covered with kudzu; grasses grew tall along the roadside; cotton scraps littered the fields and highways after the harvest; oak trees held on to their leaves until the spring grass turned green, then they dropped a rain of brown. It seemed like everything needed to be straightened up, ordered, pruned.

When I returned to Tennessee from Japan, not only did the landscape remain unkempt, but certain characteristics of my family became unexpectedly complicated. History, which my family had concealed much like kudzu covers trees, was revealed to me, and suddenly my family seemed to reflect the Tennessee landscape—disordered, tangled.

A move to Iowa gave me the distance I needed to understand things my family hid—an illegitimate child and an inter-racial relationship. When I read Faulkner’s Absalom! Absalom! during my first year of graduate school, I was confronted with the choice to either
try and understand my family or to ignore the truth. I found myself relating to Quentin. We both had to dig through and try to understand complicated family histories, and like Quentin, I found myself trying to convince myself that I don't hate the South. “Hope for the Harvest” is the culmination of this time in my life, and it works through my thoughts and struggles with the issues I faced. However, several of the poems in this collection are the result of my thinking about how I relate to Tennessee in regards to my family (“Wandering like the wild wind of hell,” “Tennessee: Raveling the Edges of Who I Am,” “The Center that Holds”).

But Tennessee means more to me than wild landscapes and complicated family issues. It holds memories of my childhood. Memories of playing with my brothers and running with them through thickets and pastures, helping my grandfather in his garden, riding to the cotton gin with my father, watching my mother can tomatoes. All of these memories are accompanied with smells and sounds and they all add to how I am rooted in Tennessee.

Not only do my memories root me in Tennessee, but my faith also roots me there. Tennessee is where I grew up going to church. Drives to church were often narrated by my dad’s commentary on the crops. The church we attended was a small country church with a good percentage of its members cotton farmers. Land became one foundation in my life; faith became another.

Just as my views of Tennessee changed with distance, so too did my view of faith. Like the landscape that I had never noticed while living in it, my faith was something I took for granted in Tennessee. But as I moved away from the land of my youth and the birthplace of my faith, I began to realize the importance of faith in my life. As Tennessee grounded me in place, Christ grounded me in faith. My belief came into focus, and the distance that a
move to Japan and a move to Iowa gave me allowed me to find the relationships that exist between land, memory, and faith. I began to see how these three things grew out of one another. I noticed how God revealed Himself to people through nature repeatedly throughout the Bible. I thought about the land from which I was distanced, remembered how I interacted with it, remembered Christian principles I was taught as a child, remembered those drives to church past never-ending cotton fields. My memories were grounded in Tennessee, and so was my faith; as I gained a deeper understanding of how I related to both, my desire to explore them grew.

This collection represents that exploration. The point where land, memory, and faith intersect motivated me to write many of these poems. Land and faith, faith and memory, memory and land—just about any combination of these three can be found here, and as distance has given me the perspective I needed to understand these things, it has also given me the ability to write about them.
... he retraced the stages of his journeys,
and he came to know the port from which he had set sail,
and the familiar places of his youth, and the surroundings of home . . .

Invisible Cities
Italo Calvino

Way off ahead of you, at the horizon where cotton fields
are blurred into the light, the slab will glitter and gleam
like water, as though the road were flooded. You'll go whipping
toward it, but it will always be ahead of you,
that bright, flooded place, like a mirage.

All the King's Men
Robert Penn Warren
Wandering like the wild wind of hell

through these Tennessee gravel roads
I realize, as the dust lifts, bends
around my body, and lays a fine coat of soil

on me, this place is where I’ll sink down
my hands, pull up the roots of time and memory
and tie them around my waist,

my wrists, my ankles until they curl and reach
round with a force that drags me back
down under all the piles of history

and earth that have layered themselves
beneath my feet like bricks. I’ll go down
and with the swift wind in my hair

I’ll roll my head back and face the sun,
take my deepest breath and know
there’ll be a fine growth from this planting.
roots
Tennessee: Raveling the Edges of Who I am

When I was there, I was a cotton farmer’s daughter with wild hair and bare feet and I let no one tie my days to order. I climbed the highest trees, fingered scars in the rough bark, and felt my hands turned raw and sweaty. When I looked over the cotton fields, I saw deer flash their white tails and run when they caught my scent. I’ve run, too, through the roughest fields with grass whipping my bare legs and the ground rising up to meet my fast steps. I was a sister and fought my brothers with the wrath of a young woman. I pounded my fists into their adolescent chests and I even bloodied their noses. And I bloodied my knees and elbows, fell from swings and bicycles, cut my feet on the gravel drive. I was a granddaughter and I walked my grandfather’s garden rows, found bits of coal and glass, reached through the scratchy squash and picked fruit swollen with time. And now time reaches up for me and takes me back to Tennessee, a place far away, a place once visited, once lived, and it shakes out its memory in my mind the way my grandfather shook fruit trees—bringing the ripest, most delicate to the ground. I look back at that cotton farmer’s daughter and see her ragged pants and tangled hair and I say to myself: this is who I am.
Coming Home

I come from a place
where people only trust
the ones who sound the same,
where cotton dust clings
to skin, and smells of diesel
and sweat cut through September air.

A place where dirt is ripe,
where cotton fields, full and spotless,
divided by groves of oaks and maples,
stand soft, clean, and untouched
in the shadow of turning leaves.

But I’ve missed the harvest once again.
The fields now lie bare,
no tractors meet me on the highway,
no white lint floats through the air.
It’s calm and quiet down the dirt roads
of West Tennessee, and I’m alone
on an early winter day.

Driving roads whose turns
I know in my bones, I look for trees
that have always welcomed me home.
The tall, broad oak stands
on Tinker Hill, full-leafed and reaching.
The old, shedding sycamore bends over
to see me down Williams Road,
my name carved on its bark—
territory I’ve claimed.
When I approach the house,
I see the lights and know inside
my father sits in his rocking chair reading
*American Heritage*, while my mother
sleeps in the recliner.

They’ll smile when I drive up, and
he’ll meet me on the sidewalk
with a long hug then help me
with my bags. And she’ll wait,
her right hand on the frame,
her left holding open the door,
welcoming me at that threshold
where memories began.
My breath turned ephemeral, swirled and lifted into nothingness as I stood at the edge of the white gravel drive, watching the dark northern sky, salted with stars, stretch and tear to reveal moving shifts of red. Slowly but wildly they pulled over the tree-lined horizon and lifted high into the sky like flames of a distant fire.

This far south and I saw them, those crimson northern lights, like the fingers of a dancer, lower themselves into my southern world and gracefully hover over the house.

I wonder if my life here will move as wildly along the broken horizon, if it will stretch, tear, reveal bits of grace. I wonder if I will lift up from this land, stretch my arms and fingers and shine in shifting shades of scarlet.
Maple Leaf Rag

My eighty-three year old grandmother wants to hear the *Maple Leaf Rag*, wants to lift the hems of her pants, pretend they’re a skirt, and swing her legs. Bent with determination, she sticks her elbows out and moves with the spirit of a school girl, remembers the parties, the times she’d sneak out and listen to the rowdy ragtime. The Charleston moves through her like Southern wind, slow and heavy, and she feels it in her bones. I pop the keys and Scott Joplin sings until she loses her balance and steadies herself, smiling, at the edge of my piano.
Autumn Cotton

I

Searching for more cover
from cool autumn nights,
I find my great-grandmother’s quilt.

Clumps of cotton, still white after years,
dangle from the ragged pieces worn through.

I pull the most precarious strands,
roll them through my fingers, smell
rich soil, a humid evening and remember.
II

I climb the cool metal ladder,
swing legs over the top,
and step into the soft autumn
smell of cotton.

Bottomless at first,
it comes to my knees
before growing firm.

The sound and vapor
of my breath the only signs
of effort or disturbance.

Hair-like fibers tickle my nose,
cover my dark jeans,
dust my hair.

It consumes me.
Dusk in autumn, a driving coolness
and the call home, but I
find ways to bury myself
in the natural cover of cotton.

I dig houses and tunnels
into the white, giving earth
and wait, suspended, untouched
and warm, in a raw cotton pillow.
IV

Once, with the shed sheltering them from dew,
Tom and Bill spent the night in a full cotton trailer.
No pillow, no cover, only cotton.

My mother wouldn’t let me go.
*Maybe another time,* she said.

I was the youngest and a girl,
allowed to roam, but not as far,
as deep as they.

That night, I dug fingers into the quilt,
pulled it over my head, breathed
the bitter smell of time and cotton.
A Poem in Four Seasons

Winter

I smelled the blood before I reached the shop and knew inside I'd find my grandfather running his knife over the steel, getting ready to cut through the thick fat and meat of the freshly killed hog. My father and brothers were there preparing to block it out then salt the hams. The heaters glowed orange and dust, diesel, grease, and salt mixed in the air with the smell of blood.

The hog rested on planks supported by sawhorses. I approached carefully, interested in the pale, hairy body. Its head lay separate, a blue bruise between its eyes where they'd stunned it before cutting its throat, and brown paper bags held its feet, intestines and stomach. These would be taken to Rachel, the black woman up the road. She'd season stock, make chitterlings, and find uses for all the things we couldn't.

I'd heard stories of pig brains with scrambled eggs and pondered this dreadful truth as I looked into the expressionless eyes. My mother once brought home a can of pork brains when the grocery clerk bagged the wrong groceries. I remembered holding the can close, shaking it and listening, wondering what they looked like. Looking at the large skull and remembering the small can, I wondered what filled the space.

The body was cold—its temperature spent on this overcast, damp day. I pulled at the coarse hairs, but they didn't move, picked up the coiled tail and pinched it, amazed at how hard it was. Cartilage, my grandfather said while rubbing sugar cure on the hams. Dad sawed the row of ribs, and my brothers helped when asked. I tucked the tail into the pocket of my coveralls, walked home, thought about the cold hard center of a once warm life, and dreamed of fresh sausage, pork chops, and fried tenderloin.
When the spring water was high, we fished the fallen trees and hidden stake beds of the Tennessee. Bucketfuls of minnows held hopeful promise. We fished deep in the cool weather, fighting the gusts, waiting for the orange float to jiggle and bob. This time we were successful, and as we unloaded the truck, our catch weighed down the blue cooler.

The whole family came out to see what we'd brought home, and we posed fish in hand, behind the old equipment shed to photograph our trophies. Close-ups always made with our hand, just to measure the size. I smiled as the crappie swelled in size beside my adolescent hand.

Reaching into the cooler, my grandfather stuck his finger in the mouth of a crappie, his thumb through the gills and plopped it down on the outdoor table. With tools in hand, he scaled the fish, small flakes filled the air—a rain of iridescence. The ground beneath shimmered in afternoon light, revealed years of this ritual. He positioned his knife beneath the gills, pressed into the white flesh, and a cut down the belly revealed sacs of golden eggs and pink tender insides.

I watched his disciplined hands maneuver the knife. He was precise and sure of every cut. One by one, he emptied the cooler and filled another with clean, white bodies. Even in the cool April breeze, sweat dripped from his nose, made his glasses slide out of place. His shirt was sequined with scales, his brow with beads of sweat.
Summer

In the muggy morning heat, my mother's skin glistened as she and my grandmother sat in white lawn chairs, icons of summer. It was almost the fourth of July, and under the pecan tree with bristle and toothbrushes in hand they rested elbows on knees and brushed away the silk from each ear of Silver Queen.

I joined their circle, took up an ear of corn, a brush, and worked until the silks fell loose and free, but I quickly tired of the mountains of garden corn my grandfather brought to us.

As I left, I noticed my grandmother's graying hair shining in the traces of sun, and I remembered the light and my great-grandmother's silver hair, long and straight, falling below her shoulders, how it had gleamed in the summer sun as my grandmother brushed it out slowly. Now, years later, my grandmother used the same soothing strokes, the same gentle hand, to silk the corn.

For years my grandmother had put up corn, but now she sighed as my grandfather emptied the wheelbarrow. Her hands were tired, her eyes dulling. But by the time she finished, she'd be covered with silks and she'd shine like royalty.
I held the dove with my left hand, picked the feathers from its quiet breast, split its sheer skin along the breastbone then followed the firm bone to the tip. There, I thrust my thumb inside the body and pulled its breast clean of the cavity. A fresh kill, the warm blood splattered onto my vest, ran down my thumb. I broke off his wings and freed the small breast from its body.

Tonight we would eat them. Sautéed onions and mushrooms covered the small rounded bodies as my mother seasoned them with garlic, Worcestershire, and lemon juice. We reveled in our kills as the aroma of our efforts rose in flavor-filled steam. We talked about tough shots, ones we missed, and we hummed with delight when the breasts came out tender and moist.

Earlier I'd sat hidden between rows of cotton with almost a full box of shells weighing down the pockets of my camouflaged vest and pulling at my shoulders. The morning was damp and heavy, and steam lifted from the open ground my brothers and I overlooked. We had scattered along the edge of the field, disappeared into the greens and browns of turning cotton leaves and waited patiently for the whistling of a dove in flight, waited to spot the peaceful shape above the tree line.

My father taught me to hunt, how to load, unload, and shoulder my gun. He taught me to lean into the shot, sight down the length of the barrel until I was leading the bird just enough to bring it down. And when the birds came our way that morning and dropped in on the open ground, I shouldered my gun, readied for the kick, and fired. The bird folded its wings, hugged them close, and fell—a spiraling gray figure against the early morning sky.
Baptism

Tonight, in the back bathroom,
where the tiny blue tiles felt cold and
icy under my feet, Miss Martha Nell helped me
into a small white robe. I could hear
the congregation singing “Victory in Jesus”
as I climbed up the narrow staircase, paused
at the landing, and looked down into the pool blue water.
The pastor stood with an outstretched hand,
motioning for me to come down into the water.

From the sanctuary, it looked like I was stepping
into a gently flowing river — soft green grass lined
the banks and a large branching sycamore
shaded the water. Emptying into the baptistry,
the river wound gently through the mural
until it disappeared on the horizon.

For years, I’d sat in the cushioned pews
and imagined the mural a perfect picture
of heaven — pure blue sky, calm clouds,
countryside as far the eye could see, a river
running right through the center. Closing my eyes,
I felt the breeze on my cheek.

The water was cold against my skin,
goose bumps rose under the thin robe,
I looked out at the deep scarlet carpet,
noticed the white walls.
Afterward, with wet hair, I ran with others into the night to play, and as they disappeared around the corner, I stood motionless, thinking I should be different.
branches
Speculation
Ikoma, Japan, 1999

In a Japanese bookstore
I bought a map of Tennessee
and hung it on the wall
of my tiny apartment.

Names like Bells,
Friendship, Finger reminded me
of cotton gins, back yards, and oak trees.
Highways I once drove down
took me to Milan, Paris, Memphis.

I looked for Cherokee,
Bird Song, and Cub Creek along
the thin blue line, but the places
where my grandfather and I thrived
on trot lines, crappie rigs, and six dozen minnows
were unnamed oxbows and tributaries.

With no Hatchie River to lead me home,
the Forked Deer River ran close.
But Smokey Lane wasn’t there,
Miss Gladys’ pond gone,
Gum Flat not even mentioned.
I was lost in a map of home
where my grandfather’s land
was shapeless, my house
only a speculation.
Remembering the Legend of Lady’s Bluff

Down Mount Ikoma’s steep west side
Osaka lies, like the murky surface

of the Tennessee, where a lady
with a lover’s name on her lips

rode her white horse into the swirling
eddies below. I think of her

every morning as I ride through the tunnel
into the smog bright belly of Osaka,

imagine her wild hair, her long dress
fluid in the wind of the fall.
Tōjinbo: location of a rare rock formation near the Japan Sea famous for suicides

The wind drives them back,
pushes them away from the edge,

you don’t want to belong to the sea, it says.

Those waves, the constant motion,
it’s too much, too strong for you.

But they stand anyway,
brazenly facing it,
their raven hair shining,

flying from their faces.

Eyes squinting in the harsh air,
tongues tracing lips for salt,
they climb to the top, the smallest point,

a pivot the only way to turn back.

The white tipped water
slaps the base of the tall rocks,

urges them to choose this place—
tell the world they know the lies

of the wind and the calm that waits
under the tall, dark sea.
Hiroshima
August 6, 1999

I'd just written "never again"
and signed my name to a peace quilt.
People filled the park, and among
colorful paper cranes and floating lanterns,
I was silent—a loud foreigner in this quiet place.

When I first saw him, his hat reminded me
of my grandfather, and his plaid jacket
hung on his shoulders is a similar way.
He was slightly stooped, deliberate, calm.

As our paths crossed, he looked up at me,
sad, intense eyes, also like my grandfather,
and asked, *What country?*

They had fought one another in the same war,
and I felt all the curiosity and time-weighted guilt
of those two men come pressing in on me.

*America,* I replied, startled
by the dry and brittle sound it took on.
My breast didn’t rise with pride,
my heart didn’t beat with red, white, and blue.
Standing there, I took a deep breath,
and my Japanese grandfather
nodded his head, tucked his hands
behind his tired back,
and walked away.
Iowa Song

Away from driving Delta blues
    and wooden west Tennessee sounds,
a song of prairie and wind rises,
    causes me to check my rhythm, check my rhyme
yield myself to a new time
    that tumbles like long, dry corn leaves
over midnight soil, rises and blooms.
    Pregnant with everything I’m not,
it gives me new arms and legs,
    new ways to walk this flat earth and feel
the rolling beat move through me.
Heartland

I want to kiss
this black earth,
stretch my arms
to the horizon,
dig fingers
into the moist soil,
and smell its richness,
fixed and fertile,
enter me.

I want to walk
the long rows,
reach up
the slender bodies,
grab handfuls
of corn silk,
and feel the sticky sweetness,
fresh and new,
cling to me.

I want to push
my clean hands
through the open ground,
pull up the center
of this place,
taste the roots found deep,
and eat until
this heart
land consumes me.
Winter Forecast: A Southerner's Projection

The cold does not call ahead,
it arrives fully packed and ready
for a long stay.
If fish and company
smell in three days,
then winter reeks by March
when slush and snow take over.

“Oh, it’s your first
winter here,” they say,
waiting to see me
wince in the wind
and slide in the snow,
but mostly waiting
for me to fall.

And they will think to themselves,
Go home Rebel girl
to your shade trees
and lemonade
and your nice long summers.
Go home Rebel girl
to your thirty-degree
winter days.
Go home
to where winter has learned
Southern hospitality
and leaves in due time.
Gilded

Riding to church alone
this time I rounded the corners
with little patience
and caught a butterfly
on my windshield wiper. She lay
pushed back against my speed
reaching her legs for escape,
and I sped on, ever watchful of her
powder yellow wings.
As the engine quieted, I saw
her relax. I picked her up.
She regained her breath,
found her flight,
and left me standing,
fingers gilded,
like the pages of my Bible.
When I’m Gone

Will they write about the
movement that’s fluttered my skirts,
tangled my hair, and weathered
wrinkles onto my face? Will they
record the Tennessee humidity,
the cotton dust that clings to my skin?
Or the smells of pasture—the tangible
odor of my grandfather’s cattle.

Or will it be my running,
my dreaming of running:
(like a horse let loose in the tall grass
my mane runs long and deep in the wind)

Or will they check my luggage to see where
I’ve been? Maybe a word or two about Arashiyama
and the rows and rows of pearls that we didn’t steal,
or the cable car to Tojinbo where I didn’t fling
myself over, onto the dull immense rocks
and into the deep. Or maybe Cairnes
where I matched bourbon and cokes
with two Aussie farmers.

Or will they research the food I ate:
garlic mashed potatoes, endless chicken dinners,
chocolate. Maybe they’ll find out how
the state of my house governed me to no end,
dusty shelves: bad mood, unclean sheets: restlessness
unvacuumed carpet: paranoia
(I am the bride to be
making myself presentable and perfect)
Perhaps their interest will lie in things
I thought were well hidden—
books, journals, scraps of paper
littered in drawers I've long forgotten.

Maybe they will write about it all
and sum up the things I couldn’t,
characterize my habits as usual, label
me a product of my time. Or maybe they’ll
list my name under the last woman
from Tennessee to die and leave it at that.
fruit
I’ve run

out the back door
down the red brick steps
across the gravel drive
around the house
through the pasture
into the pond
through cotton fields
down Williams Road
around the track
and around the truth
from Tennessee
across the yard
faster than my brothers
faster than all the boys
from Mississippi
to Australia
from lips ready to kiss
and arms reaching
from closed doors
to Japan
back to Mississippi
for more school
and then to Iowa
from mild winters
to fields brown
with the harvest
from the land of cotton
to the land of corn
to places most girls won’t go
and many men avoid
with the wrong crowd
with the wind
against my face
to a place I call home.
The Center that Holds

Grounded in this place, where things
sometime slip loose of earth and float
down dusty forgotten roads,
I ease my pace, try not to run through
this rumbling world into an unknown field
flowered with cotton scraps and oak leaves,
where the sweet smell of sassafras trees
lifts up and weaves through the humidity.

I have to walk through this place and dig
beneath the heavy soil and find there the dust
of time and cotton that knots up
on my shoulders: grandfather’s shadowing
prejudice, a black man now the father
of my cousin’s baby, land fallen
hard and unfruitful, a heavy hope
that things will turn around,
a recognition that the harvest is over.

If I quicken my steps and turn,
I tangle my feet in ropes
that wrap round my ankles
and tie me down in a land of white hope.
Each time I run past these trees and fields,
smell the sweetness rising, each time I
try to brush dust from my shirt,
I come closer to the center of where I know
myself. The center that holds like
the universe and reaches out into galaxies
I can only dare to explore.
Evergreen

              *I am like the green pine;*  
              *your faithfulness comes from me.*  
              —Hosea 14:8

From where I lie  
under the thick branches,  
limber like youth and thick with age,  
I pick out blue patches that weave through  
the narrow breaks in its deep green arms.

I grab handfuls of fallen needles,  
break them into pieces,  
and my fingers turn sticky,  
smell like spring light after rain.  
The tree stretches above me,  
green filling my vision,  
and I know that without Your presence,  
I too would break away  
and sail to the copper coated earth.
Genesis

Your Father's blessings are greater... than the bounty of the age old hills.
—Genesis 49:26

I can hear the corn leaves reaching upward and outward, pulling themselves up from the roots and stretching to the sun. After green months of this tall, scratchy life they will turn, appearing to have given up everything.

This is not the rattle of a barren land. The endless rolling hills of dry brown, the parched raspy rustle of their leaves sound of plenty. Among these dying leaves, golden kernels wait. Bushels upon bushels sit in silence, abundance yet to be harvested.

And out in the fields, down the long straight rows a blessing buds, roots itself deep inside me, stretches beyond the tips of my fingers, pulls me from this black soil, and grows through me, around me.
Dawning

*My God turns my darkness into light.*
—*Psalm 18:28*

Once, it was a heartfelt crush on a drug addict and the first kiss that came later, a summer fling drinking with a bartender, endless bleeding letters to an Australian man I called my Moveable Feast, nights on my back defending myself against the cowboy hands of a Mississippi boy, and frequent phone calls to a dislocated Minnesotan who liked my Tennessee accent and wanted a wife who'd play the piano for him.

Now, I step outside and bend my head back to the fading fluorescent lights of your house, throw my arms wide and wild, look up to the sky and watch as bit by bit He opens the thick curtain of my darkness and brings out the stars. You step behind me knowing the constellations in me, the way I wax, wane, rise and set. You know what brings me out at night, and while you embrace me, I praise my God for the light—the silence, the hours of conversation, and moments on our knees in prayer. I praise Him for nights like this and the hands that rest on my hips with ease.
Provision

They asked and He brought them quail
and satisfied them with the bread of heaven.
He opened the rock, and water gushed out;
like a river it flowed in the desert.
—Psalm 105:40-41

Bedlam, and they rise.
Feathered movement across the sky
breaks my prayer, and I stand
on the horizon in full light,
carried by the hurried wings
and questioning song of quail.
My blood drives hard against my veins.

He has brought them from the edges,
the hidden depths I cannot see.
My belief gives them wings;
my faith, like the hot steady beating
in their small breasts, sets them in motion.

“Daily bread” I plead, and He gives
me the light and cloud of heaven
to break with strong hands and eat.
I taste the starch turn sweet,
and see the sun surrender to night,
pause in brilliant and boundless color,
and spread streaks of grace in orange,
hot yellow, and assuring shades of blue.

I taste and see. I taste and see.
And in this desert, I drink from the cracking rocks
that spill the fluid that coats
and quenches. Here in this land,
hot sand rising on the rough dry wind,
I am full and satisfied.
My Handiwork: A Poem for Good Friday

My handiwork—
a meticulously hammered nail
pushed through the perfect place
beyond cartilage, not quite bone—
stops me painfully as I work
with my carpenter husband.

I cringe, stare at my wound,
and think of Christ hanging,
wood groaning under his weight,
hand pulsing an empty grip. My hand
bleeds, drips, spots my shirt. I see wounds,
wrists, rib, feet, and brow,
open flesh bleeds, and I feel
covered by blood, washed in the blood,
find power in the blood, and say

Bring it down, Lord.
Fall on me with a heavy presence.
Take me to the limits of who I am.
Push me past what I was.
Stretch me the thinnest I can be,
fatten me on your bread. I wait
with open mouth and clean hands.
Bring it down.
Salvation: to make wide

Open me up, right to the center
where ripe things wait for harvest
and the dead for pruning.

A cut running through the thicker
parts, a fine line to the heart.
Open me up, right to the center

find there a body not weaker
but willing and a soul no tempest
moves, where branches wait for pruning.

Drop inside seeds of life, alter
what I am, and grow in me the softest
place. Open me up, right to the center.

Stretch out of me into something finer
past rambling bushes and dust
and find there nothing in need of pruning.

Make me like you, Father,
and turn my worst into your best,
Open me up right to the center,
leave nothing dead for pruning.
Faith

Chaining myself to a light
and easy burden, a work so satisfying
it becomes natural and rises
in me with the power
of a thousand ocean waves.
Peace moving, filling
this Tennessee girl until
I find freedom from small
things and large ones—
freedom from worry,
a letting go of making plans,
a giving up of knowing.
My bones glow and this body,
which fits me like a dirty shirt
itches my skin and begs
for a bath, will fall away
to the nothing it once was.
Then I will find waiting
for me a linen so fine
all I can do is finger the hem
and hope for a better fit.
Beloved

Come my lover, let us go to the countryside, . . .
If the pomegranates are in bloom—
there I will give you my love.
—Song of Songs 7:11-13

A cool sweet aroma fills the air,
humidity lifts from the river

and curls the fine auburn hairs on my head.
Broad orange flowers open,

turn delicate, and my love for you rises
on the wind like their fragrance,

like the winged insects coming
to life in the sunlight that filters

through spring green leaves
and limber branches, a brief

shining, an illumination
of sheer wings. You put your hand

on my thigh and our eyes
fasten to one another. A look

I have practiced to hold, a fire,
a deep and long shining,

an illumination of my fair skin
until I too flower in this afternoon light.
Offering

Your eyes leave behind
the day's work
and find me alone.
Scarred, rough fingers
turn gentle on my body
and we turn,
move in shy circles,
hovering, waiting
to descend
and gracefully
come together.
Our bodies open
like the hands of a small child.
Hungry

Open wide mouth and I will fill it.
— Psalm 81:10

Itching in this skin that fits me loosely
I wait, silently wondering when He will

bring me words to push me beyond
these binding fingertips, words

to make me reach and stretch until I
find myself new. Then I will run and fly

beyond this blue with a belly full of truth
and a mouth wanting more.
After being asked why she’s so light, my mother says you gotta let ‘em go—those things of a weighted life that pile and drift up against you. Let ‘em fly down from your fingers—forgotten at your feet. Let ‘em go from your bones—the meat of time grows there and tightens as you stop stretching and loosening. Drop ‘em from your eyes like a lover leaving and returning alone. Drop and push ‘em down so they won’t come back, and as they fall with awkward movement, you will step strong, lighter.
Hope for the Harvest

I have missed nine harvests since graduating from high school. College, travel, a life outside of Tennessee, have all kept me from the white hope that bursts open every fall. But every year, whether near a harvest or not, my heart leans homeward to the crooked roads and cotton fields of Crockett County. This place of tall sycamores and oaks, fence rows overgrown with sarsaparilla trees and blackberry vines, and high, sword-like Johnson grass calls me home and hooks itself in me. And like walking past the razor-edged leaves of Johnson grass, I have walked through this place and been marked. But it is the cotton that brings me back. Like the lint that fills the air every fall, Tennessee lands on me and covers me in a layer of cotton dust. During the harvest of 2000, I felt the heaviness of this place fall on me when I heard about my cousin.

Crockett County, where autumn is either the collapse or fulfillment of a year’s worth of hope, boasts over 80,000 acres of cotton and is considered rural, with most town populations fewer than 3,000. And when dropped down into the middle of this place, one quickly realizes how closed it is, how rural, and how foreign the outside world must seem to those, like my grandfather, who rarely leave the boundaries of land they own. But beyond the tree lined driveway that divides my childhood home from my grandparents’ is another world—never in full view, never open and clear. Tall trees and grasses make any attempt to see the horizon futile. Every sunset is disrupted by the bushy tops of tree lines; the sun never completely seen to bed. I’m sure my cousin felt these boundaries squeeze in on her the year we found out she was dating a black man.

Growing up, I could look in any direction and see a cotton field. And I knew that past those tree lines, and beyond the gaping kudzu, there was more cotton. I could ride with my
grandfather through his lower fields and never leave the borders of a cotton field. It was everywhere. Small and tender in the spring and leafy and full through the summer, it turned into “White Gold” in the fall and became “King Cotton.”

My grandfather was born in the front bedroom of the house he still lives in and grew up on the land he now owns, but he has been weighed down by this place, this land. Granddaddy is what I know of my family—strong, honest, forthright, generous, and conservative, and I love him. Proud and quiet—he silently carries much of what he believes and thinks, but if I were to peel him open, I know I’d find the soil of this land and endless rows of cotton. Years of riding with him to the fields, the cotton gin, and going fishing with him, taught me the quiet honor that pervades his character. He is a man of integrity who strives for fairness and sincerity in every situation. So much so that he even wants to be honest with his enemies. “Jenny,” he said to me one day “when I think someone is a son of bitch, I want them to know it.” And so it was.

The raw heaviness of the harvest and my grandfather’s carved character landed on me when my mother made the announcement about my cousin. We had been shopping all day in Tupelo where I’d driven up from Mississippi State and she’d driven down so we could meet in the middle. Cotton fields lined the highway as I drove to Tupelo, and they were beginning to open up, bits of white peeked through the leafy rows. As we got into the car to drive to the last store, she took on a serious look. “What is it?” I asked her. As I started the engine, I noticed the leather interior was warm and smelled comfortable.

She replied, her words full of sadness and disappointment, “Connie has a black boyfriend.”

“Damn.” I said, my mother flinching at my profanity.

“And,” she continued, “she’s expecting.”
“Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit,” I reeled off. After questions about the due date, which was within a week of my sister-in-law’s, my thoughts turned toward my grandparents. They didn’t like black people, and they certainly didn’t like inter-racial couples. Although my father and his brother had a black babysitter when they were little, and my grandfather had hired black employees throughout the years, I had never heard them say anything positive about them. “Do grandmamma and granddaddy know?” I asked.

“No,” mom replied. “We didn’t even know she had a boyfriend. She’s been seeing him for a couple of years.”

“A couple of years,” I gasped. I remembered back to all of the family dinners, Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve parties, fish fries, and she’d never even hinted that she was seeing someone.

We were a close family, in many ways. My grandparents lived between their two children—my father to the east and my uncle to the west. In the two years Connie had been dating this guy, she had lived two doors down, visited my grandparents almost daily, dropped in to say hi to my mother, and joined us for most family get-togethers. Now she was pregnant, and I knew she wouldn’t be able share it with anyone in the family. Although not her parents’ favorite, Connie was my grandparents’ favorite on my uncle’s side of the family. She had grown up in the shadow of her younger sister, and my grandparents had compensated for the unequal attention she received at home. If my grandparents didn’t know about her pregnancy, then how could we talk about it, and if they did know, how could we talk about it? I decided right then that this would kill my grandparents. It was autumn, and thoughts of the harvest are stressful enough; now they had to deal with an inter-racial illegitimate pregnancy. They would fall down dead when this hit them. I could see my grandfather’s heart breaking, and by my shortness of breath, I decided I could feel it too.
“She was raised better than that,” I said angrily. I felt a strong need to talk to her, tell her she should have known better, ask her what she was thinking, ask her how she could do this to my grandparents, how she could do this to me? For over twenty years, I had looked to my family as the perfect example—a family built upon honesty and openness. I’d heard almost every member of my family mention someone’s character, their honesty. People who demonstrated these same traits were described as being “straight up,” “open-faced,” “solid,” and I had assumed that my family epitomized these qualities. And now, after realizing that the ideas I had about my family weren’t exactly correct, I found myself angry. Why couldn’t things be the way they used to be? What happened to the family that I esteemed so much? How could this happen to my family? Weren’t we above such things?

“It’s just as much Uncle Robert and Aunt Rita’s fault as it is Connie’s,” I said bitterly. Uncle Robert was my grandmother’s obvious favorite, but a constant source of heartache for my grandparents. He’d wrecked my parents’ wedding car, married three times, was sent away when he was younger for something no one will tell me about, and now ran the family farm in a way that tended to aggravate my father and grandfather.

“There are a lot of things you don’t know about Uncle Robert,” my mother said.

“Like what?” I was still angry and getting madder and more disappointed by the moment.

“He’s got an illegitimate child, too.”

I sat in silence. “She’s 21,” my mother continued, “and lives a few miles down the road, and she has Brooks as her last name.”

I could feel it all pushing in on me, coming down—this place, these secrets, heavier than the cotton dust, but quieter and less noticeable. They’d kept the existence of this girl quiet for 21 years. I had lived down the road from a half cousin, a Brooks, for the majority
of my life. I wondered what she was like, who she looked like, was she just as stubborn as
the other Brookses? It turns out that when she turned sixteen, her mother put her picture in
the local newspaper, announced her to the world, and claimed my grandparents as her own.
I’d never seen this picture or the article, but mom told me that it had infuriated my
grandparents.

The more I thought about it, the angrier I got. How could people who had a spoken
and unspoken code of honor, ignore and hide the fact that their life wasn’t perfect? I was
mad at everyone. I was mad at Connie for being stupid and getting pregnant. I was mad at
my Aunt and Uncle for not raising her they way she should have been raised. And I was mad
at my grandparents for hiding one of their namesakes from the world. I knew that my
grandparents probably wouldn’t handle Connie’s situation any differently.

I could feel it sifting through the air, and all the tension and frustration came down
and landed on me. At twenty-five, in the middle of northern Mississippi during the harvest, I
became disillusioned. I knew then that going home would never be the same as I realized
that everything my family prided itself on, trust, honesty, fairness—everything, might easily
disintegrate under the pressure of this event.

My mother and I went our separate ways that day; I drove south and she headed
north. I had recently returned from a year of teaching in Japan and was still re-adjusting to
the United States, to the South. Strangely, I realized, Japan and the South were very similar.
Both placed great importance on honorifics and general respect for anyone in a position of
authority. Both valued social etiquette. Both kept unsightly things hidden from the public
eye and rarely discussed them in private. Both subtly held on to ancient prejudices, refusing
to change them or even admit to them.
A few weeks later, I went home for Thanksgiving. Driving north on highway 45, I looked over the fields being picked, noticed tall cotton pickers lumbering through the fields, the full cloud of diesel exhaust and cotton lint filling the air behind them and knew that home would be much the same—I’d walk heavily through the days, a thick cloud hanging over the house, the air stiff and heavy and full of untold secrets. And it would feel the same, too. It would be difficult to find my breath in the heavy air.

Thanksgiving—I used to be thankful for my strangely solid family with little to no problems. Now, I dreaded it, didn’t know how I should act or what I was should do. The few weeks that I’d had to think about and digest the situation, the angrier I got. For years my grandparents had pretended as though one of their grandchildren didn’t exist; what were they going to do about this one? I expected them to disown my cousin, tell her to never show her face again. She’d made two wrongs, and there was no right. By dating a black man, she’d done, in the eyes of my grandparents, the unthinkable. Now she was having a black man’s baby, and I figured the racism that subtly dwelled in my family would emerge in full light. I prepared myself for the worst.

I also wondered if Connie would give up the baby for adoption, or if she’d have an abortion. The later frightened me, and I found myself questioning what I would do. Would I take on the child to save its life?

The harvest was almost in, but there were patches of unpicked fields still bursting white and full. So much hope, so much promise, but such a risk. Rain could delay getting the crop in or potentially lower its value. I remembered back to the awesome white fields of my childhood when Granddaddy would ring the door bell, walk into the kitchen and announce to me and my mom that there was a field where they were bringing in three bales an acre. Double the average, he was thrilled, and wanted us to take a look at one particular
field, which was a short drive down Lower Jackson Road. The smell of granddaddy’s dusty truck filled my nose, and I noticed bits of cotton clinging to his shirt and the seat cushions. A fine layer of lint coated the dash board. The harvest was in, and I felt the excitement of it as we entered the field. Across the road, cotton fields stretched all the way to the Forked Deer River bottom. The water wasn’t out, but if the rain set in, as expected, there would be fields flooded and possible crop loss. As we approached the field, tall trees, some covered with kudzu, reached over the road and kept it hidden from us. But then it appeared. It seemed to lift from the ground like a solid white cloud.

“It looks like snow,” my mother sighed. Big, fat drops of cotton had landed here, and little brown hands were raising them to the sky, offering them up to us. I watched the tall, red cotton pickers slowly move through the field. I wanted to make them stop, make them wait. To my seven year old eyes, it was too pretty for them to take, and they seemed in such a hurry. Cotton lint and diesel exhaust bloomed in the air behind them, and the rich smell reached me as I sat next to my grandfather.

“Can’t they wait? It’s too pretty to pick,” I said looking up to him.

“Nah,” he answered, “we got to get it in as soon as possible.” I noticed him look over the tree line at the clouded sky and could almost feel the rush, the necessary greed of the harvest.

I thought back to him looking out over the nearly perfect field, how calm, how quiet he had been, and I wondered how he would react to Connie’s news. Here in this place, this slice of the land of cotton where old times truly aren’t forgotten, I wanted to look away so badly; I wanted to turn my head and see something different, something clean and simple and safe. Something white, like the cotton that grew everywhere. Not something mixed. In this business of cotton, cleanliness is important. Crops flourished if they came out of the field
white white, if the amount of trash was hardly noticeable, if the fibers had remained white throughout the harvest and not been stained brown by the bur, the dried fingers of an opened boll that hold the locks of cotton. Purity made for a good crop and a well-pleased farmer.

These same principles applied on the social level as well. Although not as overt, racial prejudice and the desire to keep the races separate remain fibers that thread through this land. Inter-racial couples, now seen more often than before, still receive disapproving stares. And there remains a distinct line between black and white that defines behavior and communication. My cousin was bringing this reality to my family. And just like noticing the cotton that surrounded my house, I now began to notice the prejudice that floated through the air. From my bedroom window, I could see the classic Cotton Incorporated sign hanging on my grandparents’ shed. On the way to church, we’d pass at least two cotton gins, and within fifty yards of our front door lay a cotton field. It was everywhere. And I knew that when Connie had that baby, the obvious prejudice would feel the same way. Look out my window: see the remains of what I once believed to be true. Drive to town: see the divide that grows there. Walk out the door: run face to face with what I didn’t want to know. I could feel the racial tension and family secret everywhere.

But it wasn’t surprising as much as it was disappointing. I never heard racist comments from my own parents, but there were times, while sitting around my grandparents’ dining room table, that rough-mouthed comments about blacks would be thrown around—usually from my grandfather or grandmother. We regularly ate dinner with my grandparents, usually soon after the evening news. I remember many times when my grandfather walked into the dining room and commented on “some dumb black basketball player” who “couldn’t talk” and who “you couldn’t understand.” But it wasn’t just athletes that received these comments, black politicians, black newscasters, and black businessmen also incited a
reaction from my grandfather. During these brief outbursts, the rest of the family sat quietly. On occasion someone would agree or nod their head, but usually we sat quietly. I used to tell myself it was a sign of times; they were from a different generation, a different way of thinking. But it was more than generational; it was also regional.

Toward the end of Thanksgiving break, my grandfather asked me to go fishing with him. He knew I loved to go, and since the harvest was almost in, he felt it was safe to leave the farm for a day. Feeling obligated because I hadn’t been home or fishing in a very long time, I agreed to the trip. We loaded minnow buckets, life jackets, nets, and a tackle box and drove the hour to Cherokee boat dock. At the river, we unloaded all of the things we had packed. I’d done this hundreds of times, but since we were both older, I took some of the heavy things and carried them down the ramp, over the rickety planks of the floating dock to our boat. Granddaddy stepped into the small, dull green, flat bottom boat, and I handed him everything. He put the cooler behind the middle seat, one minnow bucket in front, one in back, and hung a life jacket on each seat. I unhooked the front tie and pushed us back into the warm sunlight and still open water of the marina.

Fall is beautiful on the river. It’s never too cold, never too hot. We decided to go to Cub Creek—his favorite spot to crappie fish. It’s here that he knows the details of every little inlet; where to find the submerged trees that deeply house waiting crappie; where to steer the boat just missing hidden stumps that appear only as shadows beneath the surface. I watched—amazed that someone could know one place so well.

We made our way to the back of the inlet and found a few of our favorite places. In the soft and still silence of the inlet, we were sheltered, and all sounds came to us early—warning of any movement long before we saw evidence of its existence. Gaggles of geese
honked their entrance. Barges bellowed to oncoming boats, and we readied ourselves for the undulating wake. Hilltop trees rattled and shook for the wind. We were silent. What was there to say? Instead, with a deliberate hand, he pointed to a heron standing one-legged in the shallow water along the shore and a fox squirrel rustling through fallen leaves.

He didn’t know about Connie; no one had broken the news to him or my grandmother. I watched his old hands grip the paddle. They were rough and his nails had turned thick with age. With his right arm, he sculled the boat effortlessly, but I could see his arm flexing and knew that his chest was probably tight from the work. In his left hand, he held his fishing pole, and although he was in his seventies and often shook the peas off his fork when he ate, he held the pole steady. Everyone else in my family had started using the fiberglass “crappie rigs” when they came out, but granddaddy still used a cane pole.

He felt comfortable here, away from the weight of things at home, and smiled back at me as we sidled up to a half submerged tree. I realized how true that “eventually all things merge into one, and a river runs through it.” No matter how close I was to my grandfather, no matter how comfortable I was with his silence, there would always be a river that divided us—a river that we sometimes shared, but one that held different currents for each of us.

I couldn’t separate the things going on in my uncle’s side of the family from my own side. They had all merged together. I’d never be able to pull them apart, the secrets, the prejudice, the years-in-the-making silence that seemed to grow faster these days. As badly as I wanted my cousin’s pregnancy to not affect me, I knew it would, and I hoped I’d learn to navigate the situation like my grandfather guided the boat—careful of the shallows and watchful of sunken stumps and on-coming barges.

We usually caught several fish here, and I could tell that he was excited. With one hand holding the paddle, he eased his hook into the narrowest, most dangerous place. A
place that was full of little branches waiting to hang up the line or cause the minnow or hook to break loose. And when a fish bit, he smoothly lifted his line, sure to set the hook, but gentle so he wouldn’t lose the fish and brought it into the boat. He’d smile and laugh when we caught a lot and be disappointed when we didn’t. Today, he smiled often, and he laughed when I pulled my line hard and shot the fish up into the air and over the boat. “Get him in the boat, Jenn-er-ator,” he said smiling.

We sat together, pleased with our catch and moved along to the next spot. Cub Creek was full of small inlets tucked out of the wind and lined with trees tilting precariously over the water. Towards the back of Cub, a rock wall formed the border between the river and a steep hill. For lunch, we pulled up to the end of the rock wall, tied on to a low hanging branch and opened the cooler. I knew grandmamma had packed our lunches, but granddaddy had been the one to ask me what I wanted to eat and drink. I knew he’d have bologna, so I asked for tuna or turkey. He reached in the cooler and pulled out a sandwich for each of us, a Coke for me, Seven-up for him, a Twinkie and a few mini Snicker bars. I knew he’d requested the Cokes and Snickers just for me.

The late November day was cool and there was a slight breeze rustling through the remaining leaves. The sky was a hopeful blue with a few thin clouds.

“Well, I’d be pleased to quit and go home now. We’ve done good,” he said proudly. “Bettye’ll be pleased with the mess we have, won’t she? I’ll tell you what, your mamma loves to eat them crappie,” he chuckled.

Laughing, I said, “She does indeed. She’s actually been wanting to come up here with dad sometime and go fishing.”

“That’d be nice. They’d have a good time,” he said. He’d always liked sharing the river with anyone who loved it the way he did. He often told stories of old friends, fishing
buddies, and family who’d spent time with him on the river. He was especially happy when his grandchildren came with him. When I was with him, he made sure to introduce me to the people he knew and brag about my fishing skills. I was sure he did this with all of his grandkids, but it always made me feel good.

After lunch, we fished for a little while, and then decided to call it quits. We had a “mess of fish”—enough to feed the family—so we gladly headed back to the dock to unload the boat and drive home, making sure to leave time for everyone to come over, dad to come home and cook the fish, and mom to make the hushpuppies.

Later, around the table, granddaddy and I recounted our day, the times we’d been hung, the one that got away, the birds we’d seen, and I started to remember how much he loved his family. He was so happy sitting there looking out at the faces of his children and his grandchildren while talking about the river—the one thing he’d shared with everyone. I sat to his right, my spot at their table for as long as I remembered, and watched his hands shake, listened to him laugh about the day. He and my grandmother still didn’t know about Connie, and even though we’d had a great day, I still dreaded what would happen when they found out.

I went back to school thankful things hadn’t been discussed around the table, thankful I didn’t have to witness my grandfather being told about Connie, thankful even that we could sit down, knowing there was something hidden, and have a wonderful dinner.

Soon after arriving back at school, my mother telephoned and told me that granddaddy and grandmamma knew. My uncle had told them about Connie. She said that granddaddy, after hearing the news, slowly got up from his desk and walked to the back
porch where he sat for the rest of the afternoon. I was still worried about how they would react to Connie when they saw her in person, but I was glad they had finally been told.

The harvest was over. Many trees had turned various shades of brown, but the maples and sumac stood out like flares of deep orange, caution red, and spotted yellow. It had been a stressful season with late rain making the crop difficult to get out, farmers kept out of the field because of mud and wet cotton, but now the fields lay stripped, and picked cotton plants stood spindly and bare. The fields would look like this until a slight grassy covering sprouted between the rows and spring made its appearance. The same was true of family discussion regarding Connie. The topic seemed to disappear and turn empty until Connie’s pregnancy became more and more physically apparent.

Throughout winter and towards the arrival of spring, mom commented on the silence and avoidance of the situation. Grandmamma had questioned once, in a hushed breath, what mom thought about Connie then went on to say that it (Connie’s out-of-wedlock pregnancy) made her sad. Mom reported that grandmamma began to cry. I don’t know if they every spoke about it again.

Connie made random stops at the gas tank belonging to my grandfather’s farm to fill up her car, but she had stopped her semi-regular visits with my mother, and she never went in my grandparents’ house while pregnant. However, my Aunt and Uncle kept us posted on her health and well-being through intermittent and tearful visits. We were torn up, it seemed, and we almost feared the little child that grew inside Connie.

A few more months past, and Connie went into labor. She’d had a tough labor; the baby’s head was turned the wrong way, and it made delivery difficult. My entire family rallied around her. Mom, dad, and my brothers were sure to be there when she gave birth. I was unable to be at the hospital because I was at school, but when mom told me that both
grandmamma and granddaddy went to the hospital to be with her, I was shocked enough to become hopeful. Mom explained that Connie’s boyfriend was there and everyone had remained civil throughout the whole ordeal. I think my grandfather even shook hands with him. I was hopeful, but just like the scraps of cotton that littered the fields for months after the harvest, the doubt I had about the situation still remained in my mind.

Months after little Austyn, a name that reflects no family ancestry, much of what I expected came to pass, and sometimes I wonder if that’s because I didn’t expect more, didn’t hope enough for the situation to be worked out and smoothed over. Instead of being worked out and smoothed over, everyone adjusted, learned how to live in the new world that suddenly exploded into our atmosphere.

Connie was coming around more and she brought Austyn with her. She visited my mom regularly again, told my Aunt that she felt welcomed in my parents’ home. She didn’t feel as welcomed at my grandparents’ house, but she made it a point to visit. A small child has a way of bridging gaps between people, and little Austyn’s innocence did manage to bring out more compassion in my grandparents. But it was a struggle for them and Connie, and her visits were short. I’d heard that granddaddy would leave the room when she and the baby were around, that he could tolerate little time in their presence.

It was many months later that I witnessed his discomfort. More than a full year had past since the initial shock of Connie’s pregnancy. Every season had made its cycle and another harvest had been brought in. When we all gathered at my parents’ house for Christmas dinner, it was the first time we’d all been together—new additions and all (my sister-in-law had also had a little girl), and this was the first time I saw my grandparents’ pain over the situation.
As we finished eating dinner, tradition called for everyone to open his or her presents. It was a ritual we’d done since I can remember. However, as everyone got up from the table, sighed about their full stomachs, my grandfather walked through kitchen, out the door, and back to his house. While we gathered in the living room, my mother asked where granddaddy was. I could sense my grandmother’s anxiety as she said that he’d gone home. My mother and I exchanged glances; Connie, too, could feel the rejection; my Aunt teared up.

“Well, he needs to come back over here,” my mother said in a joking motherly tone to smooth over the moment. My grandmother agreed to call and tell him to come back. She later said that he didn’t know we were going to open presents.

We sat around the living room that night, watched as the children opened their presents and watched as Austyn and Ellie, my brother’s new daughter, played together and laughed. Ellie was fair skinned with dark hair that laid flat or stood up straight on her head and her dainty features made her resemble my grandmother. Austyn’s complexion was more creamy and tan, tiny dark curls clung tightly to her head, and her broad features didn’t match with the family’s. She was a beautiful baby, good-natured, and happy, and Connie was a good mother, but we sat awkwardly, trying, learning.

As soon as the present opening had finished, my grandfather said his good-byes and headed home. I would witness this many times in the near future—Connie and Austyn together followed by my grandfather’s abrupt departures.

Now Austyn is over a year old and my grandfather never speaks of her. He will talk about Connie, occasionally ask about her, but I’ve never heard him mention Austyn’s name. My grandmother calls her “Connie’s baby,” but she, unlike my grandfather, will hold Austyn
and play with her. I don't know what will happen or if my grandparent's will ever fully accept Connie and Austyn, but I continue to hope, as the farmer hopes for his new crop, that the scraps of doubt in my mind will slowly disappear and be replaced by a budding faith that my family will grow and learn to thrive again in this new situation, that we will, like the cotton plants every autumn, hold up our hands full of soft grace and understanding, and a new hope will burst open to be harvested.
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