SING, UNBURIED, SING

A NOVEL

JESMYN WARD

NATIONAL BOOK AWARD–WINNING author of
SALVAGE THE BONES

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SCRIBNER

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For my mother, Norine Elizabeth Dedeaux, who loved me before I took my first breath. Every second of my life, she shows me so.

Who are we looking for, who are we looking for?
It's Equiano we're looking for.
Has he gone to the stream? Let him come back.
Has he gone to the farm? Let him return.
It's Equiano we're looking for.

—Kwa chant about the disappearance of Equiano, an African boy

The memory is a living thing—it too is in transit. But during its moment, all that is remembered joins, and lives—the old and the young, the past and the present, the living and the dead.

—from *One Writer's Beginnings*, by Eudora Welty

The Gulf shines, dull as lead. The coast of Texas
glints like a metal rim. I have no home
as long as summer bubbling to its head

boils for that day when in the Lord God's name
the coals of fire are heaped upon the head
of all whose gospel is the whip and flame,

age after age, the uninstructing dead.

—from "The Gulf," by Derek Walcott

Chapter 1

Jojo

I like to think I know what death is. I like to think that it's something I could look at straight. When Pop tell me he need my help and I see that black knife slid into the belt of his pants, I follow Pop out the house, try to keep my back straight, my shoulders even as a hanger; that's how Pop walks. I try to look like this is normal and boring so Pop will think I've earned these thirteen years, so Pop will know I'm ready to pull what needs to be pulled, separate innards from muscle, organs from cavities. I want Pop to know I can get bloody. Today's my birthday.

I grab the door so it don't slam, ease it into the jamb. I don't want Mam or Kayla to wake up with none of us in the house. Better for them to sleep. Better for my little sister, Kayla, to sleep, because on nights when Leonie's out working, she wake up every hour, sit straight up in the bed, and scream. Better for Grandma Mam to sleep, because the chemo done dried her up and hollowed her out the way the sun and the air do water oaks. Pop weaves in and out of the trees, straight and slim and brown as a young pine tree. He spits in the dry red dirt, and the wind makes the trees wave. It's cold. This spring is stubborn; most days, it won't make way for warmth. The chill stays like water in a bad-draining tub. I left my hoodie on the floor in Leonie's room, where I sleep, and my T-shirt is thin, but I don't rub my arms. If I let the cold goad me, I know when I see the goat, I'll flinch or frown when Pop cuts the throat. And Pop, being Pop, will see.

"Better to leave the baby asleep," Pop says.

Pop built our house himself, narrow in the front and long, close to the road so he could leave the rest of the property wooded. He put his pigpen and his

goat yard and the chicken coop in small clearings in the trees. We have to walk past the pigpen to get to the goats. The dirt is black and muddy with shit, and ever since Pop whipped me when I was six for running around the pen with no shoes on, I've never been barefoot out here again. *You could get worms*, Pop had said. Later that night, he told me stories about him and his sisters and brothers when they were young, playing barefoot because all they had was one pair of shoes each and them for church. They all got worms, and when they used the outhouse, they pulled worms out of their butts. I don't tell Pop, but that was more effective than the whipping.

Pop picks the unlucky goat, ties a rope around its head like a noose, leads it out the pen. The others bleat and rush him, butting his legs, licking his pants.

"Get! Get!" Pop says, and kicks them away. I think the goats understand each other; I can see it in the aggressive butts of their heads, in the way they bite Pop's pants and yank. I think they know what that loose rope tied around the goat's neck means. The white goat with black splashes on his fur dances from side to side, resisting, like he catches a whiff of what he is walking toward. Pop pulls him past the pigs, who rush the fence and grunt at Pop, wanting food, and down the trail toward the shed, which is closer to the house. Leaves slap my shoulders, and they scratch me dry, leaving thin white lines scrawled on my arms.

"Why you ain't got more of this cleared out, Pop?"

"Ain't enough space," Pop says. "And don't nobody need to see what I got back here."

"You can hear the animals up front. From the road."

"And if anybody come back here trying to mess with my animals, I can hear them coming through these trees."

"You think any of the animals would let themselves get took?"

"No. Goats is mean and pigs is smarter than you think. And they vicious, too. One of them pigs'll take a bite out of anybody they ain't used to eating from."

Pop and I enter the shed. Pop ties the goat to a post he's driven into the floor, and it barks at him.

"Who you know got all they animals out in the open?" Pop says. And Pop is right. Nobody in Bois has their animals out in the open in fields, or in the front of their property.

The goat shakes its head from side to side, pulls back. Tries to shrug the rope. Pop straddles it, puts his arm under the jaw.

"The big Joseph," I say. I want to look out the shed when I say it, over my shoulder at the cold, bright green day, but I make myself stare at Pop, at the goat with its neck being raised to die. Pop snorts. I hadn't wanted to say his name. Big Joseph is my White grandpa, Pop my Black one. I've lived with Pop since I was born; I've seen my White grandpa twice. Big Joseph is round and tall and looks nothing like Pop. He don't even look like Michael, my father, who is lean and smudged with tattoos. He picked them up like souvenirs from wannabe artists in Bois and out on the water when he worked offshore and in prison.

"Well, there you go," Pop says.

Pop wrestles the goat like it's a man, and the goat's knees buckle. It falls face forward in the dirt, turns its head to the side so it's looking up at me with its cheek rubbing the dusty earth and bloody floor of the shed. It shows me its soft eye, but I don't look away, don't blink. Pop slits. The goat makes a sound of surprise, a bleat swallowed by a gurgle, and then there's blood and mud everywhere. The goat's legs go rubbery and loose, and Pop isn't struggling anymore. All at once, he stands up and ties a rope around the goat's ankles, lifting the body to a hook hanging from the rafters. That eye: still wet. Looking at me like I was the one who cut its neck, like I was the one bleeding it out, turning its whole face red with blood.

"You ready?" Pop asks. He glances at me then, quickly. I nod. I'm frowning, my face drawn tight. I try to relax as Pop cuts the goat along the legs, giving the goat pant seams, shirt seams, lines all over.

"Grab this here," Pop says. He points at a line on the goat's stomach, so I dig my fingers in and grab. It's still warm, and it's wet. *Don't slip*, I say to myself. *Don't slip.*

"Pull," Pop says.

I pull. The goat is inside out. Slime and smell everywhere, something musty and sharp, like a man who ain't took a bath in some days. The skin peels off like a banana. It surprises me every time, how easy it comes away once you pull. Pop yanking hard on the other side, and then he's cutting and snapping the hide off at the feet. I pull the skin down the animal's leg to the foot, but I can't get it off like Pop, so he cuts and snaps.

"Other side," Pop says. I grab the seam near the heart. The goat's even warmer here, and I wonder if his panicked heart beat so fast it made his chest hotter, but then I look at Pop, who's already snapping the skin off the end of the goat's foot, and I know my wondering's made me slow. I don't want him to read my slowness as fear, as weakness, as me not being old enough to look at death like a man should, so I grip and yank. Pop snaps the skin off at the animal's foot, and then the animal sways from the ceiling, all pink and muscle, catching what little light there is, glistening in the dark. All that's left of the goat is the hairy face, and somehow this is even worse than the moment before Pop cut its throat.

"Get the bucket," Pop says, so I get the metal tub from one of the shelves at the back of the shed, and I pull it under the animal. I pick up the skin, which is already turning stiff, and I dump it into the tub. Four sheets of it.

Pop slices down the center of the stomach, and the innards slide out and into the tub. He's slicing and the smell overwhelms like a faceful of pig shit. It smells like foragers, dead and rotting out in the thick woods, when the only sign of them is the stink and the buzzards rising and settling and circling. It stinks like possums or armadillos smashed half flat on the road, rotting in asphalt and heat. But worse. This smell is worse; it's the smell of death, the rot coming from something just alive, something hot with blood and life. I grimace, wanting to make Kayla's stink face, the face she makes when she's angry or impatient; to everyone else, it looks like she's smelled something nasty: her green eyes squinting, her nose a mushroom, her twelve tiny toddler teeth showing through her open mouth. I want to make that face because something about scrunching up my nose and squeezing the smell away might lessen it, might cut off that stink of death. I know it's the stomach and intestines, but all I can see is Kayla's stink face and the soft eye of the goat and then I can't hold myself still and watch no more, then I'm out the door of the shed and I'm throwing up in the grass outside. My face is so hot, but my arms are cold.

* * *

Pop steps out of the shed, and he got a slab of ribs in his fist. I wipe my mouth and look at him, but he's not looking at me, he's looking at the house, nodding toward it.

"Thought I heard the baby cry. You should go check on them."

I put my hands in my pockets.

"You don't need my help?"

Pop shakes his head.

"I got it," he says, but then he looks at me for the first time and his eyes ain't hard no more. "You go ahead." And then he turns and goes back to the shed.

Pop must have misheard, because Kayla ain't awake. She's lying on the floor in her drawers and her yellow T-shirt, her head to the side, her arms out like she's trying to hug the air, her legs wide. A fly is on her knee, and I brush it away, hoping it hasn't been on her the whole time I've been out in the shed with Pop. They feed on rot. Back when I was younger, back when I still called Leonie *Mama*, she told me flies eat shit. That was when there was more good than bad, when she'd push me on the swing Pop hung from one of the pecan trees in the front yard, or when she'd sit next to me on the sofa and watch TV with me, rubbing my head. Before she was more gone than here. Before she started snorting crushed pills. Before all the little mean things she told me gathered and gathered and lodged like grit in a skinned knee. Back then I still called Michael *Pop*. That was when he lived with us before he moved back in with Big Joseph. Before the police took him away three years ago, before Kayla was born.

Each time Leonie told me something mean, Mam would tell her to leave me alone. *I was just playing with him*, Leonie would say, and each time she smiled wide, brushed her hand across her forehead to smooth her short, streaked hair. *I pick colors that make my skin pop*, she told Mam. *Make this dark shine.* And then: *Michael love it.*

I pull the blanket up over Kayla's stomach and lie next to her on the floor. Her little foot is warm in my hand. Still asleep, she kicks off the cover and grabs at my arm, pulling it up to her stomach, so I hold her before settling again. Her mouth opens and I wave at the circling fly, and Kayla lets off a little snore.

* * *

When I walk back out to the shed, Pop's already cleaned up the mess. He's buried the foul-smelling intestines in the woods, and wrapped the meat we'll