

ALSO BY JACQUELINE WOODSON

Last Summer with Maizon

The Dear One

Maizon at Blue Hill

Between Madison and Palmetto

I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This

From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun

The House You Pass on the Way

If You Come Softly

Lena

Miracle's Boys

Hush

Locomotion

Behind You

Feathers

After Tupac and D Foster

Peace, Locomotion

Beneath a Meth Moon

brown girl dreaming

In Dr. Jesse Jeff

my fellow Brown

girl. I Dreaming

So nice meeting you.

Jacqueline Woodson
**JACQUELINE
WOODSON**

a girl named jack

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

no returns

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

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

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

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

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

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

each winter

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

Sometimes,

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

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

Ohio

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

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

somewhere.

journey

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

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

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

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

the garden

Each spring
the dark Nicholtown dirt is filled
with the promise
of what the earth can give back to you
if you work the land
plant the seeds
pull the weeds.

My southern grandfather missed slavery
by one generation. His grandfather
had been owned.
His father worked
the land from dawn till dusk
for the promise of cotton
and a little pay.

So this is what he believes in
your hands in the cool dirt
until the earth gives back to you
all that you've asked of it.

Sweet peas and collards,
green peppers and cukes
lettuce and melon,

berries and peaches and one day
when I'm able, my grandfather says,
I'm gonna figure out how to grow myself a pecan tree.

God gives you what you need, my grandmother says.
Best not to ask for more than that.

Hmph, my grandfather says. And goes back
to working the land, pulling from it all we need

and more than that.