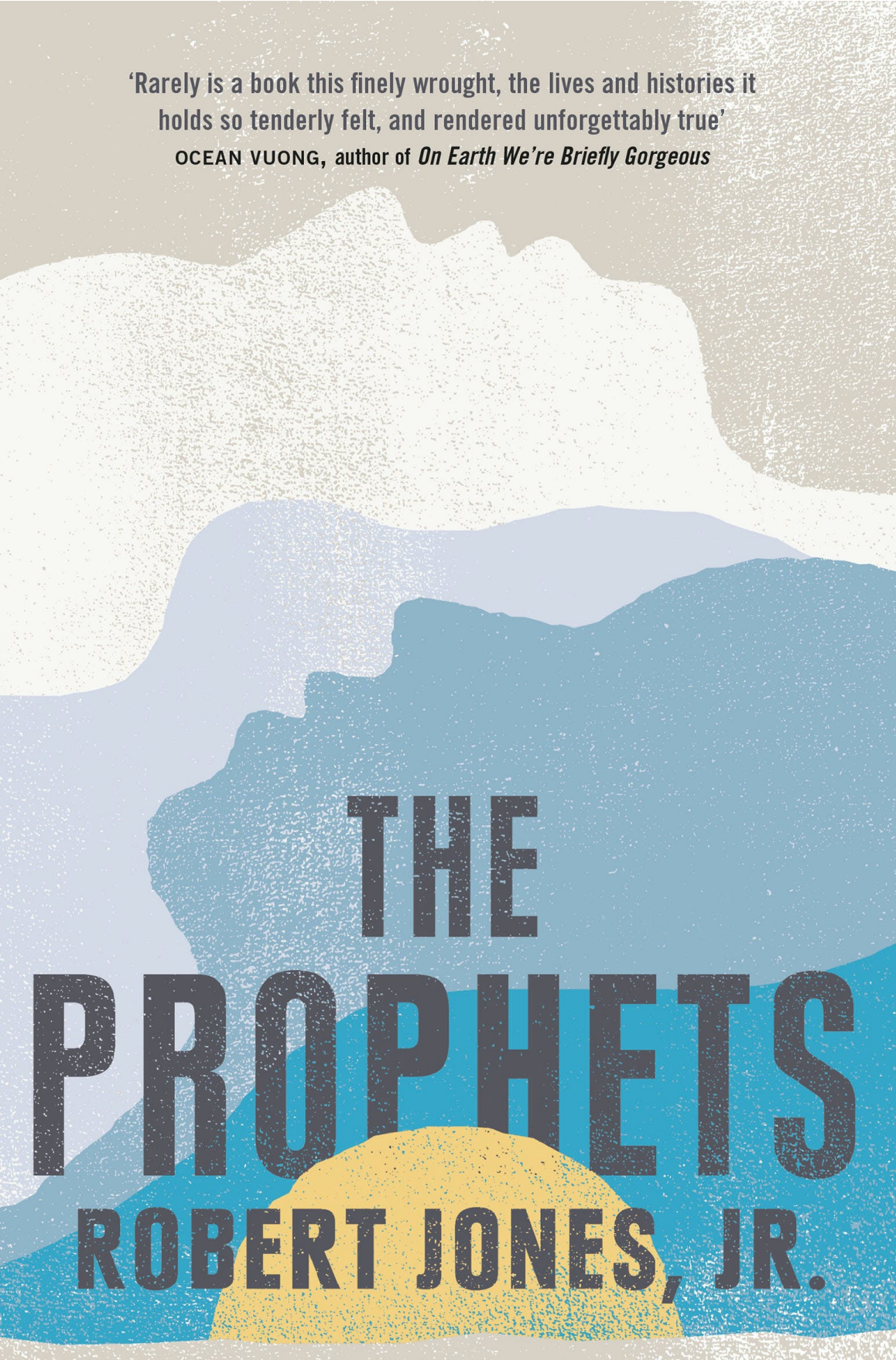


'Rarely is a book this finely wrought, the lives and histories it holds so tenderly felt, and rendered unforgettably true'

OCEAN VUONG, author of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*



**THE
PROPHETS**
ROBERT JONES, JR.

THE
PROPHETS

Robert Jones Jr

riverrun

Judges

YOU DO NOT YET know us.

You do not yet understand.

We who are from the dark, speaking in the seven voices. Because seven is the only divine number. Because that is who we are and who we have always been.

And this is law.

By the end, you will know. And you will ask why we did not tell you sooner. Do you think you are the first to have asked that question?

You are not.

There is, however, an answer. There is always an answer. But you have not yet earned it. You do not know who you are. How could you possibly reckon with who *we* are?

You are not lost so much as you are betrayed by fools who mistook glimmer for power. They gave away all the symbols that hold sway. The penance for this is lasting. Your blood will have long been diluted by the time reason finally takes hold. Or the world itself will have been reduced to ash, making memory beside the point. But

yes, you have been wronged. And you will do wrong. Again. And again. And again. Until finally, you wake. Which is why we are here, speaking with you now.

A story is coming.

Your story is coming.

It is the whole purpose of your being. Being (t)here. The first time you arrived you were not in chains. You were greeted warmly, and exchanged food, art, and purpose with those who knew neither people nor land should be owned. Our responsibility is to tell you the truth. But since you were never told the truth, you will believe it a lie. Lies are more affectionate than truth and embrace with both arms. Prying you loose is our punishment.

Yes, we, too, have been punished. We all have. Because there are no innocents. Innocence, we have discovered, is the most serious crime of all. It is what separates the living from the dead.

Eh?

A what this now?

Haha.

Forgive our laughter.

You thought *you* were the living and *we* were the dead?

Haha.

Proverbs

ON MY KNEES, IN the dark, I talk to them.

It's hard, sometimes, to understand what they saying. They been gone so long and they still use the old words that are half beat out of me. And it don't help that they whisper. Or maybe they really screaming and just so far away that it sound like a whisper to me. Could be that. Who can know?

Anyway, I dig in the spot they told me to and I bury the shiny sea stone just like they ask. But maybe I do something wrong because Massa Jacob still sell you off even after he say I a part of his family. Is this what toubab do to they family? Snatch them out they own mother's arms and load them up on a wagon like harvest? Had me begging. In front of my own man, had me begging until the only man I ever love can't even look at me right no more. His eyes make me feel like it's my wrong instead of they's.

I ask them, the old dark voices, about you. They say you right proud. On your way to becoming a man your own self. Got a lot of your people in you, but don't know it yet. And quick; maybe too

quick for your own good. I surprised you still living. I ask them, I say, “Can you give him a message for me? Can you tell him that I remember every curl on his head and every fold on his body down to the creases between his toes? Tell him, not even the whip can remedy that.” They don’t answer, but they say you down in Mississippi now, where whole things is made half. Why they tell me that, I don’t know. What mother want to hear that her child finna be carved up and carved out for no reason at all? I guess it don’t matter. Here or there, us all gone be made to pay somehow.

Ephraim ain’t said a word since they took you. Not a single word in all this time. Can you imagine? Once in a while, I see his lips move, but I be damned if any sound come out his throat. Sometimes, I want to say your name, the name we gave you, not the ugly one Massa throw on you and we act like it’s okay. I think saying your name maybe bring him back to me. But the way he hang his head, like a noose around his neck that I can’t see, I don’t have the courage. What if saying your name be the thing that take him from me altogether?

“Can I see him?” I ask the dark. “Can Ephraim? We ain’t even got to touch him. Just take a quick look to know he still ours, even if he belong to somebody else.” They say all Ephraim need to do is have a peek in one of those looking glasses. “What about me?” I ask. They tell me look in Ephraim’s eyes. “How can I do that,” I ask, “when he won’t look at me no more?” All I hear is the wind blowing through the trees and the creek-creek of bugs in the grass.

You like your people. You is *like your people*. I hold onto that and let it fill the empty space inside me. Swirling, swirling around like fireflies in the night. Holding, holding still like water in the well. I’s

full. I's empty. I's full, then I's empty. I's full and I's empty. This must be what dying feels like.

It ain't no use. No use in hollering at folks who won't hear you. No use in crying in front of folks who can't feel your pain. They who use your suffering as a measuring stick for how much they gone build on top of it. I ain't nothing here. And ain't never gone be.

What did he trade you for? To keep this rotten land that breaks the spirit and bleeds the mind? I tell you what: ain't gone be too much more of this here. Nah, sir. Take me and Ephraim and us leave here. Don't have to go nowhere, but leave. It be the same like slaughtering a hog. Just a sharp blade quick and deep across the throat and it be over just like that.

And then us get to be whispering voices in the dark telling some other people how they babies is getting along out there in the wild.

Oh, my poor baby!

Can you feel me?

I's Middle Anna and that there is Ephraim. We your ma'am and pappy, Kayode. And us sure do miss you.

Psalms

JULY HAD TRIED TO kill them.

First, it tried to burn them. Then, it tried to suffocate them. And finally, when neither of those things were successful, it made the air thick like water, hoping they would drown. It failed. Its only triumph was in making them sticky and mean—sometimes, toward each other. The sun in Vicksburg, Mississippi, even found its way into the shade so that on some days, not even the trees were comfort.

And, too, there was no good reason to be around other people when it was hot like this, but longing for company made it in some ways bearable. Samuel and Isaiah used to like being around other people until the other people changed. In the beginning, they had thought all the curled lips, cut eyes, turned-up noses—even the shaking heads—signified a bad scent emanating from their bodies from toil in the barn. The odor of swill alone had often made them strip bare and spend nearly an hour in the river bathing. Daily, just before sundown, when the others were bent out of shape from field-work and tried to find an elusive peace in their shacks, there Samuel

and Isaiah were, scrubbing themselves with mint leaves, juniper, sometimes root beer, washing away the layers of stink.

But the baths didn't change the demeanor of the sucked teeth that held the two of them in contempt. So they learned to keep mostly to themselves. They were never unfriendly, exactly, but the barn became a kind of safe zone and they stuck close to it.

The horn had sounded to let them know work was ending. A deceitful horn, since work never ended, but merely paused. Samuel put down a bucket of water and looked at the barn in front of him. He took a few steps back so that he could see the entire thing. It needed a new coat of paint, the red parts and the white. *Good*, he thought. *Let it be ugly so it could be truth*. He wasn't going to paint anything, provided the Halifaxes didn't force his hand.

He walked a little to the right and looked at the trees in the distance, the ones behind the barn, down by the bank of the other side of the river. The sun had dimmed and began to dip into the forests. He turned to his left and looked toward the cotton field and saw the silhouettes of people carrying sacks of cotton on their backs and on their heads, dropping them off into wagons waiting in the distance. James, chief overseer, and a dozen or so of his underlings were lined up on either side of the constant flow of people. James' rifle was slung over his shoulder; his men held theirs in both hands. They pointed their rifles at the passing people as though they wanted to fire. Samuel wondered if he could take James. Sure, the toubab had some weight to him, and the benefit of firepower, but putting all that aside, if they were to have a right tussle, fist to fist and heart to heart like it was supposed to be, Samuel thought he could eventually break him—if not like a twig, then certainly like a man near his edge.

“You gon’ help me or not?” Isaiah said, startling Samuel.

Samuel turned quickly. “You know better than to creep up on me,” he said, embarrassed for having been caught off guard.

“Ain’t nobody *creep*. I walked right up. You so busy minding other folks’ business . . .”

“Bah,” Samuel said and waved his hand as though he were shooing a mosquito.

“You help me put these horses in they pens?”

Samuel rolled his eyes. There was no need to be as obedient as Isaiah always was. Maybe it wasn’t that Isaiah was so much obedient, but did he really have to give them so much of himself and so readily? To Samuel, that spoke of fear.

Isaiah touched Samuel on the back and smiled as he walked toward the barn.

“I reckon,” Samuel whispered and followed.

They put away the horses and watered them, then fed them a shovelful of hay and swept the remainder back into a neat stack near the front left corner of the barn, near the straighter bales. Isaiah smiled at Samuel’s unwillingness, his grunts and sighs and head shaking, even though he understood the danger in it. Tiny resistances were a kind of healing in a weeping place.

By the time they finished, the sky was black and littered with stars. Isaiah walked back outside, leaving Samuel to his grievances. This was how he would engage in his own bit of rebellion: He leaned against the wooden fence that surrounded the barn and stared at the heavens. How crowded, he thought, and wondered if, perhaps, the abundance was too much; if the weight of holding on was too heavy, and the night, being as tired as it was, might one day let go, and all

the stars would come tumbling down leaving only the darkness to stretch across everything.

Samuel tapped Isaiah on the shoulder, waking him from his reverie.

“Now who ain’t minding they business?”

“Oh, now the sky got business?” Isaiah smirked. “Least my work is finished for now, though.”

“You a good slave, huh?” Samuel poked Isaiah in the belly.

Isaiah chuckled, lifted himself off the fence, and began walking back toward the barn. Just before he reached the door, he stooped to pick up a few pebbles. In quick succession, he threw them at Samuel.

“Ha!” he yelled and ran into the barn.

“You missed!” Samuel yelled back and ran into the barn after him.

They ran around inside the barn, Isaiah dipping and dodging, laughing each time Samuel reached out to grab him, but he was too quick. When Samuel finally leaped and crashed into his back, they both stumbled face forward into the freshly piled hay. Isaiah wriggled to get loose, but the laughter made him too weak to make any headway. Samuel saying, “Uh huh,” over and over again, smiling into the back of Isaiah’s head. The horses let out loud breaths that reverberated through their lips. A pig squealed. The cows made no sounds, but the bells around their necks clanged with their movements.

After a moment more of struggle, Isaiah surrendered and Samuel relented. They turned on their backs and saw the moon through an opening in the roof; its pale light shot down on them. Their bare chests heaved and they panted audibly. Isaiah raised a hand up toward

the opening to see if he could block out the light with his palm. There was a soft glow in the spaces between his fingers.

“One of us got to get to fixing that roof,” he said.

“Don’t think of work now. Let yourself be,” Samuel said a little more harshly than he intended.

Isaiah looked at Samuel. He examined his profile: the way his thick lips protruded from his face, less so his broad nose. His hair twisted and turned any which way. He looked down at Samuel’s sweaty chest—the moonlight turned his dark skin to glitter—and was lulled by its rhythm.

Samuel turned to look at Isaiah, met his gentle stare with his own version. Isaiah smiled. He liked the way Samuel breathed with his mouth open, lower lip twisted slightly and tongue placed just inside the cheek like the expression of someone up to mischief. He touched Samuel’s arm.

“You tired?” Isaiah asked him.

“Should be. But nah.”

Isaiah scooted over until their bodies touched. The spot where their shoulders met grew moist. Their feet rubbed together. Samuel didn’t know why, but he began to tremble, which made him angry because it made him feel exposed. Isaiah didn’t see the anger; instead he saw beckoning. He rose to move on top of Samuel, who flinched a bit before relaxing. Isaiah slid his tongue, slowly and gently, over Samuel’s nipple, which came to life in his mouth. Both of them moaned.

It was different from the first kiss—how many seasons ago was that now, sixteen or more? It was easier to count those than the moons, which sometimes didn’t show up because it could be temperamental

like that. Isaiah remembered that it was when the apples had been fuller and redder than they had ever been before or since—where they stumbled, and shame had kept them from looking into each other’s eyes. Now, Isaiah moved in close and let his lips linger on Samuel’s. Samuel recoiled only a little. His uncertainty had found cover beneath repetition. The struggle that had once made him want to choke Isaiah as much as his own self was in remission. There were only traces of it now, insignificant battles in the far corners of his eyes, maybe a smidgen at the back of his throat. But it was overcome by other things.

They didn’t even give each other the chance to fully disrobe. Isaiah’s pants were down around his knees; Samuel’s dangling from an ankle. Impatient, thrusting into each other in a haystack, the moonlight shining dimly on Isaiah’s ass and Samuel’s soles—they rocked.

By the time the one slid off the other, they were already tumbled off the haystack, deeper into the darkness, spread out on the ground. They were so spent that neither wanted to move, though both craved a thorough washing in the river. Silently, they decided to remain where they were, at least until after they had regained control of their breathing and the spasms subsided.

In the darkness, they could hear the animals shuffling, and they could also hear the muffled sounds of the people nearby in their shacks, singing or maybe crying. Both were viable possibilities. More clearly, they could hear laughter coming from the Big House.

Though there were at least two walls between him and the laughter, Samuel looked in the direction of the house and tried to focus on the voices emanating from within. He thought he could recognize a few.

“Nothing never changes. New face, but same tongue,” he said.

“What?” Isaiah asked as he stopped staring at the roof and faced Samuel’s direction.

“Them.”

Isaiah inhaled deeply, then exhaled slowly. He nodded.

“So what we do? Bash the face? Split the tongue?” Samuel asked.

Isaiah laughed. “Face been bashed. Tongue already split. You’ve seen a snake before. Better to just get as far away as we can. Let them slither.”

“That’s the only choice then: run?”

“If the face don’t heed, don’t even know it’s not heeding. If the tongue don’t yield. Yes.”

Samuel sighed. He wasn’t afraid of the dark. It was where he found shelter, where he blended, and where he thought the key to freedom surely rested. But still, he wondered what happened to people who wandered off into a wilderness that wasn’t their own. Some turned into trees, he reckoned. Some became the silt at the bottom of rivers. Some just died. He lay there silently for a moment, listening to Isaiah’s breathing. Then, he sat up.

“You coming?”

“Where?”

“To the river.”

Isaiah turned on his side but said nothing. He looked in the direction of Samuel’s voice and tried to differentiate his shape from the surrounding darkness. It was all one endless mass until Samuel moved and delineated the living from the dead. But what was that sound?

A scratching noise was coming from somewhere.

“You hear that?” Isaiah asked.

“Hear what?”

Isaiah was still. The scratching had stopped. He laid his head back down on the ground. Samuel moved again, as though preparing to stand.

“Wait,” Isaiah whispered.

Samuel sighed, but returned to his position, laying next to Isaiah. When he was prostrate, the scratching noise returned and Isaiah looked in the direction it was coming from, close to the horse pens. Something took shape there. It was first a tiny point, like a star, and then it spread until it was the night he was brought to the plantation.

Twenty of them, maybe more, piled into a wagon drawn by horses. All of them chained together at the ankles and at the wrists, which made movement labored and unified. Some of them wore iron helmets that covered their entire heads, turned their voices into echoes and their breathing into rattles. The oversized contraptions rested on their collarbones, leaving behind gashes that bled down to their navels and made them woozy. Everyone was naked.

They had traveled over bumpy, dusty trails, for what, to Isaiah, seemed a lifetime—the sun burning their flesh in the day and mosquitoes tearing it up at night. Still, they were thankful for the torrential showers, when those without helmets could drink at their own leisure rather than at the gunmen’s.

When they finally reached Empty—which was what, in the quiet places, people called the Halifax plantation, and for good reason—he couldn’t make out anything except a dim light coming from the Big House. And then they were pulled one by one from the wagon, each of them stumbling because none of them could feel their legs. For some, the weight of the helmet made it impossible to stand. Others had the burden of being held down by the corpse they were chained

to. Isaiah, who was just a child, didn't even know enough to consider the man who lifted him up and carried him even though his own legs were about to give.

"I got you, little one," the man said. His voice labored and dry. "Your maw made me promise. And I got to tell you your name."

Then everything went black.

When Isaiah came to, it was morning and they were all still chained together: living and dead alike. They were laying on the ground near the cotton field. He was hungry and thirsty, and the first to sit up. That was when he saw them: a group of people holding pails marching up the path, headed right for them. Some were as young as he was. They came with water and food—well, at least as close to food as he was liable to get. Pig parts that were seasoned enough to cover up the acrid taste and alleviate gagging.

A boy with a ladle approached him. He moved the ladle toward Isaiah's face. Isaiah parted his lips and closed his eyes. He gulped as warm, sweet water leaked from the corners of his mouth. When he was done, he looked up at the boy; the sun made him squint so that at first, he could only see the boy's outline. The boy moved a little, blocking the sun. He looked down at Isaiah with big, skeptical eyes and a chin too proud for anyone to have under those conditions.

"You want some more?" the boy called Samuel asked him.

Isaiah was no longer thirsty but nodded anyway.

When the darkness returned to itself, Isaiah touched his own body to make sure he wasn't a child anymore. He was himself, he was sure, but what had just come to him, from a tiny pinpoint in the dark, proved that time could go missing whenever and wherever it pleased, and Isaiah couldn't yet figure out a way to retrieve it.

Isaiah couldn't be certain, but the remembrance that showed itself reminded him that he and Samuel were about the same age, sixteen or seventeen now, give or take a missing season. So many years and so much had remained unspoken between them. To leave it in the silence was the only way it could be and not break a spirit in half. Working, eating, sleeping, playing. Fucking on purpose. For survival, everything that was learned had to be transmitted by circling the thing rather than uncovering it. Who, after all, was foolish enough to show wounds to folks who wanted to stick their mouth-sucked fingers into them?

The quiet was mutual, not so much agreed upon as inherited; safe, but containing the ability to cause great destruction. There, lying in the dark, Isaiah, exposed too closely to his own living dream, heard it speak.

“You ever wonder—where your ma'am?” Isaiah heard it say.

He then realized it was his own voice, but he didn't remember speaking. It was as though another voice, one that sounded like his, had escaped his throat. His, but not his. How? Isaiah paused. Then he moved over, closer to Samuel. He felt his way around Samuel's body and settled his hand on Samuel's belly.

“I didn't mean . . . what I mean is, I didn't say . . .”

“You spit then try to grab it after it leave your mouth?” asked Samuel.

Isaiah was confused. “I didn't want to say that. It came up by itself.”

“Yeah,” Samuel said and groaned.

“I . . . You ever hear a voice and you think it's not yours but it is? Or it kinda is? You ever see your life outside you? I don't know. I can't explain,” said Isaiah.

He thought that maybe this was the witlessness that he saw take hold of a person because the plantation could do that—make the mind retreat so that it could protect the body from what it was forced to do, yet leave the mouth babbling. To calm himself, he rubbed Samuel’s belly. The motion lulled the both of them. Isaiah had started to blink slower and slower. He was almost asleep when his mouth woke him up.

“Maybe a piece of you, somewhere inside, maybe your blood, maybe your guts, holds on to her face?” Isaiah said, surprised at his words, rushing forth as though they had been dammed up. “Maybe when you look in the river, it’s her face you see?”

There was silence and then Samuel inhaled suddenly and quickly.

“Maybe. No way to ever know,” Samuel finally replied.

“Maybe a way to feel, though,” Isaiah blurted.

“Huh?”

“I said maybe a way . . .”

“No. Not you. Never mind,” Samuel said. “Let’s go to the river.”

Isaiah intended to stand, but his body preferred laying there with Samuel’s.

“I know my ma’am *and* my pappy, but all I can remember are their crying faces. Someone take me from them and they stand there watching me as the whole sky open up on them. I reach my hand out, but they only get farther and farther away until all I can hear is screams and then nothing. My hand still reaching out and grabbing nothing.”

Both of them stunned by this, Isaiah by the recollection and Samuel by hearing it, but neither of them moved. They were quiet for a moment. Then Samuel turned to Isaiah.

“You knew your *pappy*?”

“A man carried me here,” Isaiah said, as he heard his history being recounted by his voice. “Not my pappy, but someone who said he knew my name. He never told me, though.”

Just then, Isaiah saw his own hand reaching out in the darkness of the barn, small, frantic, just like that day. He thought that perhaps he was reaching not just for his ma’am and pappy, but also for all those faded peoples who stood behind them, whose names, too, were lost forever, and whose blood nourished the ground and haunted it. Whose screams sound like whispers now—whispers that will be the last noise the Universe will ever make. Samuel grabbed Isaiah’s hand and put it back on his belly.

“Something here,” Samuel said.

“What?”

“Nah.”

Isaiah started to rub Samuel’s stomach again, which encouraged his voice.

“The last thing they said to me was ‘coyote.’ I ain’t figure that one out yet.”

“Maybe ‘beware’?” Samuel said.

“Why you say that?”

Samuel opened his mouth, but Isaiah didn’t see. He stopped rubbing on Samuel and instead laid his head on Samuel’s chest.

“I didn’t want to say these things,” Isaiah said, his voice now a croak. His cheeks were wet as he nestled his head deeper into Samuel.

Samuel shook his head. “Yeah.”

He looked around, held Isaiah tighter, then closed his eyes.

The river could wait.