

Lesson Plans and Resources for *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

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 - NPR Article: **Writing Mississippi: Jesmyn Ward Salvages Stories of the Silenced**
 - Book Review from The New York Times
 - Interview with Jesmyn Ward
 - “Raising a Black Son” by Jesmyn Ward

These resources are all available, both separately and together, at www.freelibrary.org/onebook

Please send any comments or feedback about these resources to Larissa.Pahomov@gmail.com.

OVERVIEW AND ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

The materials in this unit plan are meant to be flexible and easy to adapt to your own classroom. Each chapter has discussion questions provided in a later section.

Through reading the book and completing any of the suggested activities, students can achieve any number of the following understandings:

- Family connection is not automatic – you can choose to care for someone, and also choose not to.
- Trauma and hardship takes up the space and time needed to live a good, healthy life.
- When their lives feel unresolved, the dead stay with us.

Students should be introduced to the following key questions as they begin reading. They can be discussed both in universal terms and in relation to specific characters in the book:

Universal

- *Who in your family cares for you? How did they get to be in that role?*
- *When has you or your family struggled? What impact did that struggle have on your daily life?*
- *Who do you know who has passed away? Does their death and life stay with you? Why?*

Book-Specific

- *Who in the family cares for Jojo and Kayla? How did they get to be in that role?*
- *What are some of the struggles their family has had to face? How did that struggle impact their lives and their relationships with one another?*
- *Who has passed away in the book, and why do they stay with the characters? What are they looking for?*

Many of the reader response questions and suggested projects relate to these essential questions, and they can be looped back to frequently.

IN-CLASS INTRODUCTION

This lesson is designed to provide students with a one-class introduction to the book. The lesson can be used to start off a class reading of the text, or to encourage them to read it independently.

As a recipient of One Book resources, the Free Library requires that you devote one class period to introducing *Sing, Unburied, Sing* to students, either using this lesson or your own plan.

Introduction

1. Have students take five minutes to answer the following prompt on paper:

What have you killed? What was the experience like?

(If they ask, students are welcome to answer the question in the figurative sense, although it is originally intended in the literal sense.)

2. Have students share their answers in pairs. When one person shares, the partner asks them the following questions:

Did you watch something die?

How did its death make you feel?

Did this experience change you in some way?

3. Hand out copies of "Sing, Unburied, Sing." Read pages 1-6 together. If you can, use the audio recording of Ward reading the first few pages on NPR:

<https://www.npr.org/2017/11/28/566933935/for-jesmyn-ward-writing-means-telling-the-truth-about-the-place-that-i-live-in>

4. Discuss: Why is killing the goat so important to Jojo? What does it show about his relationship to his Pop? How about the other members of his family? Why does he want to show he is "old enough to look at death as a man should" (5)?

5. Watch the three-minute video made about Ward when she won the MacArthur grant in 2017:

<https://www.macfound.org/fellows/1002/>

Discuss: What are some of her unique experiences growing up where she did? Does you think her world has any overlap with ours in Philadelphia? Where do you see the similarities and differences?

Correlation to Common Core Standards for Grades 11-12

INTRODUCTION LESSON + DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Reading Standards for Literature

1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
2. Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
10. By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11–CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.
By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11–CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently

Speaking and Listening Standards

1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
2. Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

VOCABULARY

Reading Standards for Literature

4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

Language Standards

4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grades 11–12 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.
6. Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

ANALYTICAL + CREATIVE ASSESSMENTS

Writing Standards

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences
4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1–3 above.)
5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience. (Editing for conventions should demonstrate command of Language standards 1–3 up to and including grades 11–12 on page 54.)
9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

READER RESPONSE QUESTIONS

Chapter 1 – pages 1-30

What is Jojo's relationship to his two grandfathers, Pop and Big Joseph? What do you think these two men think of each other?

Why does Jojo seek refuge among the farm animals? What do they offer him that the humans in his life don't?

Why has Jojo started calling his biological parents by their first names, Leonie and Michael? What's his relationship with them like?

Chapter 2 – pages 31-57

What special abilities does Mam have?

Why does Leonie choose not to tell Mam when she sees Given's ghost for the first time?

Why does Leonie choose to go deliver her message to Big Joseph in person, instead of calling on the phone?

Chapter 3 – pages 59-89

Mam explains to Jojo that there's "things that move a man. Like currents of water inside" (80). What does he mean by this? Why doesn't Jojo understand, at least at first?

What do you think is the purpose of the gift that Pop puts in Jojo's bag for the trip? What does it mean to "balance" a person (74)?

Chapter 4 – pages 91-105

Why does Kayla prefer Jojo to Leonie? How does this make Leonie feel?

Why does Leonie agree to do the drug transport with Misty?

Chapters 5 – pages 107-131

Why doesn't Jojo trust Leonie's natural remedies for Kayla? Do you think his concern is justified?

What is the reunion between Michael and Leonie like? Do you think it's a healthy one?

Who appears to Jojo at the end of the chapter? How do you know?

Chapters 6 and 7 – pages 133-167

Why is Richie left on this earth to search for River, aka Pop? What is he really looking for?

Why does he get in the car with Jojo and his family? Why does he say that it was not possible for River to save him?

Why is Leonie mean to Jojo? What does she resent him for?

Why does Leonie take the risk of swallowing the drugs during the traffic stop? Does this show that she is brave or impulsive?

Chapters 8 and 9 – pages 169-191

What does Richie want to ask River about? Why is it so important to him?

What did the sunshine woman tell River and Richie about? Why does this upset Riv?

Why does Riv feel “like home” to Richie?

Chapter 10 – pages 193 - 217

What is the symbolic significance of Leonie’s dream? Why does she keep pushing her family members up?

Why does Michael insist on going to see his family when they get home?

Why does Leonie leave the house but not drive away with the kids?

Chapters 11 and 12 – pages 219-245

Why can’t River see Richie? Why does Jojo refuse to help Richie get the answers he is looking for?

Do you think Jojo can read minds the way his Mam can? Can he really read Kayla’s mind? Or is he just a perceptive caregiver of young children?

Why does Jojo lie to Mam about seeing the dead?

Why does Richie follow Leonie to the graveyard? What does he observe about here there?

Chapter 13 – pages 247-257

Why does Jojo decide to finally ask Pop about Richie and how he died?

What was Pop’s (aka River’s) motivation to do what he did to Richie? Do you understand why he did it? Do you agree with his actions?

Chapter 14 and 15 – pages 259-285

Who does Mam see first as she begins to pass away? Why do Given and Leonie try to intervene?

Why does each family member react to Mam’s death the way that they do?

At the end of the novel, why is Richie still stuck in the world of the living? Why are there so many souls “hitting the wrong keys?”

Reading Group Guide Questions ([provided by the publisher](#))

1. The novel begins with Jojo's thoughts, "I like to think I know what death is" and "I want Pop to know I can get bloody" (page 1). How do these thoughts set the stage for Jojo's birthday and what follows?
2. How does Given's death shape Leonie, Pop, and Mam? How does it change how they relate to each other?
3. Why does Given begin appearing to Leonie after Michael goes to jail, whenever she gets high? Why doesn't Leonie tell anyone about seeing Given?
4. Leonie says from the first moment she saw Michael, he "*saw me*. . . .Saw the walking wound I was and came to be my balm" (page 54). Discuss how guilt, desire, taboo, defiance, and grief are at work in Michael and Leonie's connection to each other.
5. What does Leonie get out of her friendship with Misty? What does Jojo see in the dynamics at play between Misty and Leonie?
6. Discuss the gris-gris bag from Pop that Jojo finds hidden in his clothes (page 63). What does each item signify? Why must Jojo hide it from Leonie?
7. Why can Pop only tell Richie's story to Jojo in pieces (page 70)? What do you think Pop wants or needs Jojo to understand?
8. As Leonie looks at Jojo and Kayla in the back seat on their way to pick up Michael, she thinks, "Sometimes, when Jojo's playing with Kayla or sitting in Mama's room rubbing her hands or helping her turn over in the bed, I look at him and see a hungry girl" (page 95). Why does Leonie see this "hungry girl" in Jojo?
9. Why is Jojo convinced that "Leonie kill things" (page 108)? Why are Leonie and Jojo always in conflict, especially concerning how to take care of Kayla?
10. When Richie joins Jojo at Parchman, is it a surprise? Why is Richie tied to Parchman? And to River?
11. Why does Michael brawl with Big Joseph and ultimately choose to leave with Leonie rather than stay with his parents (page 208)?
12. When Mam insists that Leonie help her die, to "Let me leave with something of myself" (page 216), what makes Leonie hesitate? Why does she wish for Given to be there in that moment?
13. What does Richie mean when he tells Jojo, "I can't. Come inside. I tried. Yesterday. There has to be some need, some lack. Like a keyhole. Makes it so I can come in. But after all that—your mam, your uncle. Your mama. I can't. You've . . . changed. Ain't no need. Or at least, ain't no need big enough for a key"? (page 281)

14. Water plays an important role throughout the novel. Pop's name is River. Mam is known as the "saltwater woman." The town and prison where Pop and Michael are incarcerated are named for the "parched man." Jojo wonders who the parched man is, if he looked like Pop, Jojo, or Michael. Which characters seem to need water? Which are of the water?

15. Kayla is central to the final scene of the novel, with the "tree of ghosts." Jojo describes her: "Her eyes Michael's, her nose Leonie's, the set of her shoulders Pop's, and the way she looks upward, like she is measuring the tree, all Mam. But something about the way she stands, the way she takes all the pieces of everybody and holds them together, is all her. Kayla" (page 284). How is it fitting that Kayla closes the story, telling the ghosts to "Go home" and singing to them and to Jojo?

VOCABULARY

Chapter 1 – pages 1-30

Bleat (4) – The goat makes a sound of surprise, a bleat followed by a gurgle, and then there's blood and mud everywhere.

Scythe (10) – He breathed hard and grabbed his bags, and the tattoos on his white back moved: the dragon on his shoulder, the scythe down his arm.

Untether (23) – It was the only way I could untether my spirit from myself, let it fly high as a kite in them fields.

Obscure (25) – She's at the front door, paper grocery bags obscuring her, hitching the screen and kicking it open, and then edging through the door.

Chapter 2 – pages 31-57

Ointment (42) – She'd been doing mother than mothering when she put homemade ointments on me when I broke out in rashes or gave me special teas when I was sick.

Bereft (45) – I wish I could feel that sizzling lick, but I've come all the way down, and I'm left with a nothing feeling. Hollow and dry. Bereft.

Topography (46) – Now they're nothing but different colored skin in the sunken topography of her face.

Segmented (54) – Three horses roam around the segmented fields that abut the house, and a gaggle of hens scamper across the yard, under the trucks, to disappear around the back.

Chapter 3 – pages 59-89

Subdued (61) - ...so the animals I thought I could understand were quiet, subdued under the gathering spring rain.

Nape (62) – It's hot in the car, and I watch the skin all around her nape dampen and bead, and the beads run like rainwater down the column of her neck to disappear in her shirt.

Secreted (66) – She was like one of Pop's animals hiding in the barn or one of the lean-tos built on the side of the barn, secreted away from the heat.

Chapter 4 – pages 91-105

Succor (98) – Maybe because I want her to burrow in me for succor instead of her brother.

Meanders (99) – The woman smiles, and I realize she's missing her two front teeth, and a scar meanders in a scratchy line across her head.

Stoic (101) – Jojo looks part bewildered, part stoic, part like he might start crying.

Disintegrate (105) – And later, for still believing in good in a world that cursed her with cancer, that twisted her limp

and dry as an old rag and left her to disintegrate.

Chapter 5 – pages 107-131

Censure (113) – “It’s pro bono, and the school will probably get off with some sort of censure from the courts, but I couldn’t not take it,” he says, shrugging and drinking.

Carcass (123) – Her legs dangle, lifeless as a carcass’s from a hook.

Chapters 6 and 7 – pages 133-167

Indomitable (133) – The way his bones run straight and true as River’s: indomitable as cypress.

Torrent (135) – I flew. I followed the scaly bird. Up and up and out. Into the whitewater torrent of the sky.

Raucous (135) – The bird at my shoulder now, a raucous smudge on the horizon then, sometimes atop my head like a crown.

Adversaries (138) – There had always been bad blood between dogs and Black people: they were bred adversaries – slaves running from the slobbering hounds, and then the convict man dodging them.

Flailing (146) – But there ain’t no truth coming when I dry her off, ignore the lotion for her flailing, and shoulder past Jojo, who been cleaning off his chest in the mirror, and I know, watching, like a blue jay mother, ready to dart in and peck if I do her wrong.

Decipher (153) - ..His fingers on my arm drawing circles and lines that I decipher, him writing his name on me, claiming me.

Tendrils (158) – The humidity made her hair come alive around her face, tendrils of it standing up and curling away from her buttery scalp.

Chapters 8 and 9 – pages 169-191

Burrow (177) – Like the bayou when the water’s low, when the water runs out after the moon or it ain’t rained and the muddy bottom, where the crawfish burrow, turns black and gummy under the blue sky and stinks.

Feral (185) – His baby sister has flung herself across him, and both of them slumber like young feral cats: open mouths, splayed arms and legs, exposed throats.

Admonish (189) – But when I thought about the way rive admonished Sunshine Woman, how he stepped away from her to protect me, I began to understand love.

Chapter 10 – pages 193 - 217

Marooned (195) – I’ve been dreaming for hours, it feels like, dreaming of being marooned on a deflating raft in the middle of the endless reach of the Gulph of Mexico, far out where the fish are bigger than men.

Fractured (195) – I thrust them up to the surface, to the fractured sky so they can live, but they keep slipping from

my hands.

Buoyed (197) – For a moment I'm in my drowning dream again, and I feel her hot, wet back buoyed up by my palms, slipping, slipping.

Mutinous (206) – Jojo looks at me: mutinous. The corner of his mouth, frowning; his eyes almost closed.

Calcify (207) – So big Joseph can see Pop, see how stoneline he is, like Pop's taken all the hardship of the world unto him and let it calcify him inch by inch till he's like one of them petrified trees, and see anything but a man?

Chapters 11 and 12 – pages 219-245

Barnacles (234) – Like her skin's a hull eaten hollow with barnacles, and the pain's seeping through.

Perpetual (241) – The air is gold: the gold of sunrise and sunset, perpetually peach.

Deceitful (253) – I followed their tracks, and the dogs followed the smell, through the bristly stands of trees, over them deceitful fields, past the spring and the shacks to more fields, more shacks with White men and boys gathering and swarming.

Chapter 13 – pages 247-257

Whimpering (247) – Kayla woke to whimpering every half hour, and I shushed her over the sound of the singing.

Parasitic (248) – His hair is the longest I've ever seen it, and it stands up from his head like parasitic moss.

Chapter 14 and 15 – pages 259-285

Pendulum (270) – His head swings on his neck like a pendulum.

Squall (272) – And I do it again before I realize Michaela's squalling in his arms, scrambling up his chest, trying to get away from me.

SUGGESTED ANALYTICAL ASSESSMENTS

These prompts could be used for traditional essay assignments, or for responses across a variety of mediums (live presentation, digital stories via Powerpoint or video, etc.)

1. The New York Times Review says the following

For each of these characters, living or dead, what lies unasked or unspoken becomes an impediment not just to happiness or social mobility but to literal deliverance — and each must decide whether to rise to the occasion, whether to let what he or she harbors sound out.

Who achieves deliverance in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*? What is holding them back, and how do they overcome those obstacles (or not)?

2. In an NPR interview, Ward said the following about her path to becoming a writer:

"I didn't have a choice anymore," she says. "I couldn't run from that desire to tell stories, that desire to tell stories about us, and about the people I loved. I couldn't run from it anymore. And it's not that I was confident that I could actually do it. You know, that didn't get me here! Confidence definitely did not get me here! More of like, desperation. And I thought, well, I can try. At the least I can try. And if I succeed, then I will have done something worthwhile with the time that I have been given."

What story does each character in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* want to tell – and are they successful in telling that story? Choose one character and explain their message, using evidence from the text.

3. The novel references a number of real world places and events, including Hurricane Katrina, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, and Parchman State Penitentiary. Research one and develop a thesis about its relevance to the book. How do they play into the daily lives of the characters?
4. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* has been recognized for having been influenced by several other stories: *The Odyssey* by Homer, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, and *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner. Pick one of these texts to read and explore a common theme that exists in both.
5. In her essay “Raising a Black Son in the United States” (included in print resources) Ward describes the joys and perils of raising a young black man in Mississippi and getting him (and herself) ready for the dangers he will face. What struggles do individuals face in your own home neighborhood and city? Write about the challenges you or your peers face in your own lives.

SUGGESTED CREATIVE ASSESSMENTS

1. Jesmyn Ward openly identifies her hometown of Delisle, Mississippi as the inspiration for the fictional town of Bois Sauvage, where she sets all of her novels. Her characters then set off on a road trip upstate to the prison. Have you ever taken a road trip out of the city? Start a story in your own home neighborhood, and have the characters travel a distance for a good reason.
2. Richie is given a narrator's voice in this book, but Given is not. What story does he have to tell? Write a chapter of narration from Given's perspective, after one of the times he appears to Leonie. What does he want to communicate to her?
3. At the end of the novel, Kayla and Jojo are still together, and Kayla is learning to speak. What will she have to say about this family as she grows older? Fast forward the text five, ten, or twenty years into the future and write a chapter from Kayla's perspective. What does she have to say, and does she have any ghosts pushing into her life?
4. At the center of Jojo and Kayla's world are their maternal grandparents, Mam and Pop. They succeed in conveying many lessons to their grandchildren – but there are many more things that do not get passed down. What have you learned from the elders in your family? What do you still have to learn? What lessons of theirs have you rejected?
5. Who has passed away in your family – and what business did they leave unresolved in life? Tell their story.

ONLINE RESOURCES

AUTHOR PROFILES

Jesmyn Ward: “I wanted to write about the people of the south”

A profile of the author after she won the National Book Award for the first time, with *Salvage the Bones*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/dec/01/jesmyn-ward-national-book-award>

Jesmyn Ward on Fresh Air

A nineteen minute interview and accompanying printed transcript.

<https://www.npr.org/2017/11/28/566933935/for-jesmyn-ward-writing-means-telling-the-truth-about-the-place-that-i-live-in>

VIDEO

Jesmyn Ward Answers Reader Questions

Seven minutes of video where Ward answers questions sent in by readers about the background and inspiration for the novel.

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/jesmyn-ward-answers-your-questions-about-sing-unburied-sing>

Jesmyn Ward on Seth Myers

Four minutes of Ward talking about the legacy of slavery and racism in the South and how it influences her novel.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLezj-UYr1c>

MISSISSIPPI

Delisle, Mississippi

An essay by the author describing the challenges facing the residents of her home town who live in poverty, especially when it comes to securing health care.

<https://harpers.org/archive/2017/10/delisle-mississippi/>

Writing Mississippi: Jesmyn Ward Salvages Stories of the Silenced

An NPR story with accompanying 8 minutes of audio.

<https://www.npr.org/2017/08/31/547271081/writing-mississippi-jesmyn-ward-salvages-stories-of-the-silenced>

Racism is “Built into the Very Bones” of Mississippi

A long form essay describing the structural practices that encourage racism to persist in Ward’s home state.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/02/jesmyn-ward-mississippi/552500/>



Writing Mississippi: Jesmyn Ward Salvages Stories of the Silenced

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<https://www.npr.org/2017/08/31/547271081/writing-mississippi-jesmyn-ward-salvages-stories-of-the-silenced>

For writer Jesmyn Ward, Mississippi is a place she loves and hates all at once.

She grew up and still lives in the tiny town of DeLisle, Miss., close by the Gulf Coast, where, she writes, African-American families like hers are "pinioned beneath poverty and history and racism." Those struggles, hinging on race and class, run all through her writing, from her novel *Salvage the Bones*, which won Ward a [National Book Award in 2011](#); to [her searing memoir *Men We Reaped*](#), published in 2013; to her new novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.

Ward, 40, has chosen to return to DeLisle and raise her children there, despite her profound ambivalence about what the town represents.

On the one hand, "there's a feeling of belonging and of ease and of knowing who I am that I feel here that I don't feel anywhere else," she says. "There's this entire web of people that I'm connected with, and I think that gives me a sense of myself that is hard for me to access when I'm not here. A way of understanding myself: who I am, and where I come from, and *who* I come from." The familiar southern Mississippi landscape feels like a part of her, too, with its snaking bayous and dense tangles of trees.

"But," she continues, with a rueful laugh, "there's much I dislike about this place. I dislike the fact that I have to bear up under the weight of the history of this place, of the history of slavery and Jim Crow and sharecropping, the history of this place that made me."

On a driving tour through DeLisle, we pass by small homes and rickety trailers set into the brush. "This is one of the black portions of DeLisle here," she points out. We pass her grandmother's house, where Jesmyn and 12 members of her extended family lived together for a time, crowded into four bedrooms.

Ward's family has lived in DeLisle for generations, and it's where she sets her fiction, giving the town the name Bois Sauvage. Her characters are marginalized people — poor and black — who have always been seen as "worth less," she says. These are the people whose lives she brings to the page in stunning, sometimes brutal clarity.

In her novel *Salvage the Bones*, it's a family that barely survives the wrath of Hurricane Katrina: *We sat in the open attic until the sky brightened from a sick orange to a clean white gray. We sat in the open attic until the water, which had milled like a boiling soup beneath us, receded inch by inch, back into the woods.... We were a pile of wet, cold branches, human debris in the middle of all of the rest of it.*

Ward was 34 when she won the National Book Award for *Salvage the Bones*. The novel had received scant reviews, and the award came as a surprise to many, including herself. She followed it with *Men We Reaped*, her memoir about five young black men in her community who died violent deaths. One of them was her younger brother Joshua, who was killed by a drunk driver at age 19. Telling their stories, she wrote, was "the hardest thing I've ever done. But my ghosts were once people, and I cannot forget that." Now, with *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Ward has turned back to fiction. Her novel traces the twined narratives of a mixed race adolescent boy named Jojo, his drug-addicted mother, and the ghosts of those long dead who visit them.

Ward sets some of the story in the 1940s in Mississippi's notorious Parchman penitentiary. "So much about that place reveals the essence of, the worst of Mississippi," Ward says. Parchman prisoners were treated like slaves: "They were worked and worked and worked and worked, and they were starved, and they were beaten. They were tortured."

One of the ghost characters in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is Richie, a boy who was imprisoned and brutalized at Parchman when he was just 12.

"I thought, 'This person has to speak,'" Ward says. "'This person has to have agency, the kind of agency that they didn't have when they were alive.'"

Writing Richie's story, Ward says, "almost feels like I'm righting a wrong, in a fictional way. I mean, this is like putting a Band-Aid over an amputation. I understand that this is a small remedy. But I think it is a remedy." At the local bookstore/cafe in neighboring Pass Christian, Ward now shares space on the shelves with fellow Mississippi writers such as William Faulkner and Eudora Welty. This year, Ward's portrait was added to the [state's literary map](#), which strikes her as both thrilling and surreal.

"In high school, I would look at that map," she says, "and here's Faulkner and here's Welty and here's Richard Wright, and I think a part of me always dreamed or asked, 'What if? What would it be like to be on that map one day?'"

That "what if?" would have seemed a distant fantasy to Ward when she was growing up. Her father worked occasional factory jobs and raised pit bulls for dog fights. He left the family when Ward was young. Her mother worked as a maid, and at times relied on food stamps to help feed her children.

Reading was Jesmyn's escape, and she was always drawn to books about spunky girls. She easily rattles off the titles that inspired her as a young reader: "*Harriet the Spy*, [From] *The Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, *The Secret Garden*, *The Hero and the Crown*, *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, *Julie of the Wolves*, *Pippi Longstocking*."

Ward wanted to see herself in those characters, but where those girls were bold adventurers, she was a painfully shy introvert. What's more, those characters didn't look like her: They were never black.

"And that underlying message," she says, "that thing that I understood, was that stories about people like me, nobody wanted to read them, you know? Or that those stories weren't worth being told. Or that people like me weren't capable of being the hero."

Ward's trajectory shifted unexpectedly when she was in middle school and got a life-changing opportunity.

At the time, her mother worked as a maid for a wealthy white family in their mansion on the Gulf Coast, and they offered to pay the tuition for Jesmyn to go to a small, private Episcopal school. For years, she was the only black girl there.

Ward went on to Stanford, becoming the first in her immediate family to go to college; there, she got her bachelor's and master's degrees in English and communication, respectively. She figured she needed to be practical, though, so a career as a writer was out of the question.

"It made more sense for me to go to law school or go to nursing school and train myself for a profession where success was sort of guaranteed once you're done with the schooling," she recalls.

But when her brother Joshua was killed, that changed everything.

"I didn't have a choice anymore," she says. "I couldn't run from that desire to tell stories, that desire to tell stories about *us*, and about the people I loved. I couldn't run from it anymore. And it's not that I was confident that I could actually do it. You know, that didn't get me here! Confidence definitely did not get me here! More of like, desperation. And I thought, well, I can try. At the least I can try. And if I succeed, then I will have done something worthwhile with the time that I have been given."

We've been talking in the room in her home where Ward writes ("I like to call it my library, but then that sounds pretentious," she says.) Its walls are painted a deep red ("my power color"), and it's filled with books, which spill off the shelves and are piled on the floor. At one point, her 4-year-old daughter Noemie bursts in, home from preschool, eager to show her mother her own work: She's learning how to write her name. "Look at that!" Ward says with clear pride, as she cradles her daughter on her lap.

When Jesmyn Ward thinks about the future, she worries about what it might hold for her two young children, Noemie and 10-month-old Brando. She's especially unnerved by the recent violent rally staged by white supremacists in Charlottesville, Va.

"Part of me is panicking," she says, "thinking about my children and thinking about the place that I'm choosing to raise them in, and thinking about my brother, and wondering: Am I gonna be able to raise my children to adulthood? Are they gonna live to be adults, to be as old as I am now, in this climate, in this country?"

These questions weigh heavily on Ward. She thinks about leaving the South, thinks about raising her children somewhere she feels lighter, where the weight of history isn't as oppressive. But the powerful tug of family keeps her rooted in Mississippi.

Recently, Ward started work on a new novel. It's set in New Orleans during the height of the domestic slave trade, when enslaved people were packed into pens in the heart of the city as they waited to be sold.

"It's really hard for me as a writer to sit with those characters who are living through that," she says. "It's really harrowing. And it's been very, very, very slow. If I can get a page out in a day, I am celebrating." When she first started writing the book, she was jolted to realize how little she knew about the history of the slave trade in New Orleans, a city just 60 miles away from her home and where she has spent a lot of time over the years.

"I thought about all those people whose suffering had been erased," she says, "and I thought, 'Why can't they speak? Why can't I undo some of that erasure?'"

New York Times Review – Sing, Unburied, Sing

Tracy K. Smith // September 22, 2017

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/22/books/review/tracy-k-smith-on-sing-unburied-sing-jesmyn-ward.html>

Bois Sauvage, Miss., is the kind of place where a black man might be shot dead because of a bet gone awry, and where the authorities might agree to deem the incident a “hunting accident.” A place where ignoring a No Trespassing sign can get you chased off a white man’s property at the barrel of a gun. And where being black and poor or white and unlucky might get you sent upstate to Parchman Farm, the Mississippi State Penitentiary, which has evolved only superficially from the long-ago days when it operated like a plantation: “*the long line. Men strung out across the fields, the trusty shooters stalking the edge, the driver on his mule, the caller yelling to the sun, throwing his working song out.*” Though it’s a fictional town, Bois Sauvage is as mired in its own history as, frankly, most real places in America, a fact that has become painfully plain in the handful of years since Trayvon Martin’s killing first made headlines.

Readers of Jesmyn Ward’s 2011 National Book Award-winning “Salvage the Bones” will recognize Bois as the setting where 14-year-old Esch and her family live out the days leading up to Hurricane Katrina. In “Sing, Unburied, Sing,” Ward’s third novel, it is home to 13-year-old Jojo and his toddler sister, Kayla, who live with their grandparents, Mam and Pop. Pop mans the homestead, tending to the goat yard, pigpen and chicken coop with an emphatic correctness, hoping to teach Jojo what it is to be a man. Mam is in the end stages of cancer, but remains held back from passing on by something that won’t let her go. Leonie, the children’s mother, disappears for days at a time, then comes home grinding her jaw from another drug bender. Leonie’s greatest addiction, though, and one that borders on a self-annihilating compulsion, is her love for Michael, the white father of her children who has been locked up for three years at Parchman.

When Michael calls to say he’s been released, Leonie insists upon taking her children (and Misty, the friend she gets high with) on a road trip to collect him. She can’t resist the chance to make her nuclear family whole again, even if it may not want to stay that way. The bond she and Michael share is not a calm one. They fight just as hard as they love, though the things that hamstring them have mostly to do with the people around them — with Michael’s racist parents, and with Jojo and Kayla, who belong more to each other and to Mam and Pop than to Leonie. So she sets out to do this one thing, to pick up her man and show him and everyone else that they really and truly are a family.

On the road, the conventional challenges flare into view: Kayla gets sick along the way, and the only person she wants to be held or helped by is Jojo. When she narrates such scenes, Leonie’s detachment from her own children, and her frustration at their inseparable bond, bump up against each other: “He rubs her back and she rubs his, and I stand there, watching my children comfort each other. My hands itch, wanting to do something. I could reach out and touch them both, but I don’t.”

There are many moments of tenderness between the siblings, and Ward takes her time with them, letting the writing become almost an act of choreography. This is where she seems to be teaching us to recognize that black bodies can do something other than suffer and inflict pain. They can minister to each other. Love is something they know how to embody. They also know uncertainty, bedevilment, fear and doubt. But none of that bars them from understanding and sharing something as simple and as selfless as love.

Leonie loves too, of course, but she's tied up in knots about it, unable, it seems, to fit both Michael and their children into her heart at the same time. As young as Jojo is, this fact is not lost upon him. In the scenes that he narrates, Jojo describes his mother's single-minded focus upon getting to Michael as a kind of erasure:

"She turns around and ignores all of us and looks out the front windshield, gummy with bug splatter, so she doesn't even see when Kayla startles, her eyes open wide, and throw-up, brown and yellow and chunky, comes shooting out her mouth and all over the back of the front seat, all over her little legs and her red-and-white Smurfs shirt and me because I'm pulling her up out of her seat and into my lap."

Nor is Jojo too young to see that Leonie has brought her own share of danger to their mission, using the road trip up to Parchman as the chance to score and perhaps sell some drugs. He watches his mother and Misty pass bags back and forth, sees easily through their attempts to hide things under their shirts.

This dramatic situation would be enough for most writers, but Ward is seeking something more from (or perhaps for) her characters. And so the road trip, and the drug drama, and the struggle for wholeness unfold against a series of more mysterious events. Leonie is met, each of the many times she gets high, by the ghost of her brother, Given, who was shot dead by a white acquaintance (and cousin of Michael) in high school. Given watches her, all but speaking, dredging up the feelings of grief from which she has spent years running. Jojo, too, is haunted. At Parchman, he's visited by Richie, an apparition from Pop's long-ago past who seems to inhabit the prison. While the narrative levers that produce the ghost of Richie feel perhaps too visible, his presence, like Given's, powerfully changes what's at stake in the novel, introducing a sense of the mysterious, the unending and otherworldly. Under such circumstances, history, even mundane history, can't help bending to the mythic, as when Richie attempts to make sense of the ages he has spent since his death, anchored to Parchman:

"I thought I was in a bad dream. I thought that if I burrowed and slept and woke again, I would be back in the new Parchman, but instead, when I slept and woke, I was in the Delta before the prison, and Native men were ranging over that rich earth, hunting and taking breaks to play stickball and smoke. Bewildered, I burrowed and slept and woke to the new Parchman again, to men who wore their hair long and braided to their scalps, who sat for hours in small, windowless rooms staring at big black boxes that streamed dreams.... I burrowed and slept and woke many times before I realized this was the nature of time."

For each of these characters, living or dead, what lies unasked or unspoken becomes an impediment not just to happiness or social mobility but to literal deliverance — and each must decide whether to rise to the occasion, whether to let what he or she harbors sound out. Maybe that's the miracle here: that ordinary people whose lives have become so easy to classify into categories like *rural poor*, *drug-dependent*, *products of the criminal justice system*, possess the weight and the value of the mythic — and not only after death; that 13-year-olds like Jojo might be worthy of our rapt attention while their lives are just beginning.

In Jesmyn Ward's Mississippi, one must grow inured to the rituals of killing and butchering animals for sustenance. Exhausted women beat their children in public. Men of good character do unspeakable things out of necessity, and the bad men do far worse. And there, just as in the real world, caring about people like Jojo and Leonie is not a matter of looking past these grim possibilities, but rather consenting to step into them and be affected.

Such feats of empathy are difficult, all too often impossible to muster in real life. But they feel genuinely inevitable when offered by a writer of such lyric imagination as Ward. "Sing, Unburied, Sing" is many things: a road novel, a slender epic of three generations and the ghosts that haunt them, and a portrait of what ordinary folk in dire circumstances cleave to as well as what they — and perhaps we all — are trying to outrun.

Interview with the Author

Jesmyn Ward, 40, who grew up and lives in Mississippi, has been hailed as a tough yet poetic new literary voice. Her novel *Salvage the Bones* and her memoir *Men We Reaped* have both won prizes, while the collection of essays she edited and contributed to, *The Fire This Time*, is a US bestseller and is published in the UK next April. Her latest novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, has been nominated for the National Book award and the Kirkus prize. It is told chiefly through the eyes of Leonie, a drug-taking mother, and her watchful teenage son, Jojo, and unsentimentally conveys the pain of bereavement and the risks of life on the edge of survival.

There are few physical descriptions of the family home at the centre of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, yet a strong sense of it comes across. Did you draw on sounds and smells of the home you grew up in?

Place is important to my writing; I believe that if a reader gets a clear picture of the place where a character is from, then they can understand what motivates the character, what limits him or her. I grew up in a lot of different homes when I was younger: my parents rented trailers and small, boxy houses set high on cement block pillars. For three or so years, my family lived in my grandmother's house, which is the house my mom grew up in. There were 13 of us in a four-bedroom house, and it was one of the happiest times of my life, surrounded by so many people who I loved. There was a wood-burning stove in the living room because the house lacked central heat, and gas-burning heaters installed in the hallway. So I remember the smell of the burning oak and pine most strongly, and the sulphur smell of the gas. And then I remember the food, of course. My grandmother made biscuits almost every morning, and we ate a lot of red beans and rice. We had to eat cheap meals that would feed a lot of people because there were so many of us.

The idea of parallel life forces, spirits and ghosts, play a big part in your new story. What does that mean for you personally? Do you share the beliefs you give to the loving grandmother and grandfather figures, Pop and Mam?

I don't believe everything Mam or Pop believe. But some of it I want to believe, without reserve, without cynicism. My brother died when he was 19, so a part of me indulges and thinks that some part of him that made him uniquely him is out there, on another plane. So inventing the fictional afterlife in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* was a way of making that wish real.

Is it just coincidence that *Lincoln in the Bardo*, the Booker prize winner that others have linked to your work, also goes into a spirit world to communicate the sorrows of corporeal life?

Well, we're at a difficult moment in history. Many people in power are attempting to rewrite the past and the present to fit their narrative. Writing about spirits is a way to counteract some of that, because the people of the past are allowed to be present in the moment and tell their own (true) stories, and often, there is a reckoning between the living and the dead. And perhaps both books wrestle with grief; writing about ghosts allows us to puzzle through that heaviness.

Do you welcome being lined up in an emancipatory black tradition? Or should a writer like you be allowed to speak more individually?

I celebrate my blackness. I love the artistic vibrancy of the culture I was born to. I'm proud of the fact that the people of the African diaspora fight to survive, to thrive, all over the world, so of course my work reflects this pride, this investment in telling our stories. And I don't find that problematic. I also work very hard at writing, at developing creatively; I like to think that the work I do means that my books have power and weight and lasting beauty, regardless of my colour or the colours of my characters.

Has it become harder for you to write fiction in the current political atmosphere?

Our current horrors haven't silenced me yet. I don't know if they will. If anything, the current political atmosphere has made me angrier, and that's driven me to my desk, to my computer, to my books. I didn't write for two years after Hurricane Katrina hit, so it will take something like that to silence me again. And even if something like that occurs, I will return. I can't help telling stories.

Were you an optimist or a pessimist as a child? Has that changed?

I was a pessimist. Nothing has changed. Young people have a right to optimism, and rightly so; human beings have grown and developed and accomplished wonderful feats in the world. But what mires me in pessimism is the fact that so much of life is pain and sorrow and wilful ignorance and violence, and pushing back against that tide takes so much effort, so much steady fight. It's tiring.

What are you working on now and where do you work?

I'm working on a novel set in New Orleans during the height of the domestic slave trade. I write in a room in my house that I've set up as a small library, and my desk faces a window. Outside, I can see a tall cypress tree I planted five years ago and a live oak I planted at the same time that has been super slow to grow.

Finally - a big one – what is the way to combat drug addiction in communities that are hampered by prejudice and poverty?

Well, you have to go to the root of the problem. When people are struggling with undiagnosed mental illness, they may turn to drugs. When people are hopeless and feel trapped by lack of opportunity, they may turn to drugs. When people don't feel like they are accorded human dignity or freedom, they may turn to drugs. There's a lot to unpack around the [drug crisis in America](#), things like generational poverty and systemic racism and the constant winnowing of the social safety net. All of this is complicated by the fact that a lot of Americans see drug addiction as a moral failure. We have to acknowledge all of that, and then put in place policies to counteract those things that drive people to addiction. But I'm no expert.

Raising a Black Son in the United States

By Jesmyn Ward / The Guardian, 28 October 2017

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/oct/28/raising-black-son-america>

Five years ago, I bore my first child, a daughter. She was born six weeks early. She was slow to cry and pale when she emerged from behind the tent shielding my stomach. In a response that I am ashamed to admit, and one that I suspect was driven by stress, shock and anaesthesia, my first words to her were, “Why is she so white?” My obstetrician laughed as she began the work of preparing to stitch me back up. I lay there quietly, stunned by facts: I was a mother. I had a child, a ghostly, long-limbed daughter, who was still curved from the womb.

On the eve of my daughter’s first birthday, I felt as if I’d survived a gauntlet. I’d nursed her to plumpness, become attuned to her breathy cries as she adjusted to life outside my body, learned to follow a checklist whenever she was upset (Hungry? Dirty? Tired? Overstimulated?). When my solutions to the list sometimes did not ease her to calm, I learned to carry her and walk, to say again and again in her ear the same phrase, “Mommy’s got you. Mommy’s got you. It’s OK, honey, Mommy’s got you.” I said it and felt a fierce love in me rush to the rhythm of the words, a sure sincerity. I meant it. I would always hold her, have her, never let her fall.

When I found out I was pregnant again, I was happy. I wanted another child. But that happiness was wound with worry from the beginning: I was anxious about whether I could manage two children, about whether or not I would be able to be a good parent to both my children equally, whether the thick love I felt for my daughter would blanket my other child as well. And I was dreading pregnancy, the weeks of daily migraines, of random aches and pains.

As the months progressed, I developed gestational diabetes, and agonised over the prospect of another premature birth. I wanted my second child to have the time in the womb my first didn’t. I wanted to give the second the safety and time my body failed to give the first. I also underwent an entire battery of tests for genetic abnormalities. A bonus of one of the tests was that I would learn the sex of the child I was carrying. When the nurse called to deliver my test results, I was nervous. When she told me I was having a boy, my stomach turned to stone inside me and sank. “Oh God,” I thought, “I’m going to bear a black boy into the world.” I faked joy to the white nurse and dropped the phone after the call ended. Then I cried.

I cried because the first thing I thought of when the nurse told me I would have a son was my dead brother. He died 17 years ago this year, but his leaving feels as fresh as if he were killed just a month ago by a drunk driver who would never be charged. Fresh as my grief, which walks with me like one of my children. It is ever-present, silent-footed. Sometimes, it surprises me. Like when I realise part of me is still waiting for my brother to return. Or when I realise how fiercely I ache to see him again, to see his dark eyes and his thin mouth and his even shoulders, to feel his rough palms or his buttery scalp or his downy cheeks. To hear him speak and laugh.

I looked at the phone on the floor and thought of the little boy swimming inside me and of the young men I know from my small community in DeLisle, Mississippi, who have died young. There are so many. Many are from my extended family. They drown or are shot or run over by cars. Too many, one after another. A cousin here, a great-grandfather there. Some died before they were even old enough legally to buy alcohol. Some died before they could even vote. The pain of their absence walks with their loved ones beneath the humid Mississippi sky, the bowing pines, the reaching oak. We walk hand in hand in the American South: phantom children, ghostly siblings, spectre friends.

As the months passed, I couldn't sleep. I lay awake at nights, worrying over the world I was bearing my son into. A procession of dead black men circled my bed. [Philando Castile](#) was shot and killed while his girlfriend and daughter were in the car. [Alton Sterling](#) was killed in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and the police who shot him were never held accountable for his murder, for shooting and killing the man who smiles in blurry pictures, for letting him bleed out in front of a convenience store. [Eric Garner](#) choked against the press of the forearm at his throat. "I can't breathe," he said. "I can't breathe."

My son had never taken a breath, and I was already mourning him.

I read incessantly while I was pregnant. Because I could not sleep, I often woke and read in the early hours. At the time, I was doing research for my fourth novel, which is set in New Orleans and Louisiana during the height of the domestic slave trade. One day, I read about an enslaved woman whose master was working her to death to pick as much cotton as she could on a plantation in Mississippi. She was pregnant and bore a child. During the day, she left her child at the edge of the cotton field where others would watch it, so she could toil down the rows. She had no choice. Her child cried, and it distracted her, slowed the accumulation of cotton bolls in her sack. The overseer noticed. He told her to mind her row, not her child. Still, it was as if she was sensitive to the keening of the baby. She tried to ignore her child's cries and focus on the rows, but still she lagged. The overseer warned her again. The enslaved woman tried to silence her tender mother's heart, but couldn't; her infant's cries muddled her movements, bound her fingers. The overseer noticed for the last time, and in a fit of rage he stalked to the infant crying for milk at the edge of the field and killed it. In the overseer's estimation, the mother was a machine – a wagon, perhaps, made to bear and transport loads. The child: a broken wheel. Something to remove to make the wagon serviceable again. After I read this, I couldn't help but imagine the woman, speechless and broken. Dragging her way through American fields.

In a book about maroon communities who escaped slavery in the US, I encountered more children, but these children were free, after a fashion. Their parents fled slavery, stole themselves back from the masters who had stolen them. Often, these parents dug caves in the forests of the south, along river banks. They dug out cabin-sized holes in the ground and built rough furniture from the wood around them. They surfaced from the cave only at night, as they were scared of being recaptured. They burned fires sparingly, built chimney tunnels that stretched metres from their underground abodes to divert the smoke from their dark homes. To trick their pursuers. Sometimes, they bore children in the caves. I imagine a woman squatting in the dark, panting against the pain, using every bit of self-control she'd carried in the endless cotton fields to suppress her desire to scream as her body broke open and she delivered. The smell of river water and wet sand under her toes.

The women who'd freed themselves raised their children in the dark. During the day, they ate underground, worked underground, amusing themselves as they worked by telling stories to one another. Sometimes, their parents let the children climb above ground at night to play among the inky trees in the light of the moon. The horror of that choice stayed with me as my son kicked at the bounds of my belly. How horrible to fear being caught and returned to slavery, to torture, to inhuman treatment; how omnipresent that fear must have been. How the parents had to sacrifice their children's lives to save them. There are legends that say that after emancipation, their parents introduced the children of the caves to the sunlit world, and the children were forever stooped from learning to walk below the caves' walls, forever squinting against the too bright world.

The common thread of my reading and experience was this: black children are not granted childhoods. When we were enslaved, our children were nuisances until old enough to work and sell. When we escaped to freedom, black children were liabilities, forced to bend low under the weight of a system intent on finding them, stealing them, and selling them. After emancipation, boys as young as 12 were charged with petty crimes such as vagrancy and loitering and sent to Parchman prison farm in Mississippi and re-enslaved; they worked to collapse in the cotton

fields, laid track for railroads chained to other black men, fell and vomited under Black Betty, the overseer's whip, and died when they attempted to escape under the eye of the gun, at the mercy of the tracking dog.

Today, the weight of the past bears heavily on the present. So now, black boys and girls are disciplined more than their white schoolmates. They are suspected of drug dealing and strip-searched. If they fight each other or talk back to teachers in school, school officials press charges and call the police. (This is the school-to-prison pipeline.) They are segregated into poorer schools. Their schools crumble, starved for funds. They are issued textbooks that warp history, that lie to them and tell them their stolen ancestors were "guest workers". Police wrestle them to the ground in classrooms, body slam them at pool parties in Texas. The state will not afford them the gifts of childhood, as it marks them from the beginning as less than: a hooded menace in the making, a super predator in training with a toy gun, a budding welfare queen. Perhaps this is what happens when a child can no longer be commodified, no longer be bought and sold. When a nation reinvests through the centuries in the idea that allows it to flourish: the other must be subdued, sequestered, constrained. Today, the stooped children walk in the daylight, but they die in that daylight, too.

Even though I did everything I could to prevent a premature birth, my son, like my daughter, came early. I went into labour at 33 weeks. When my doctor told me I was in labour, I did what I could to halt it. I took to my bed, watched movies and read. My attempts at relaxation didn't work. I went to the hospital and delivered by caesarean early the next October morning. When they pulled my son from my stomach, he took a deep breath and wailed, inhaled and wailed again and again. His arms flung out, his fingers and toes wispread. His body arched in panic. The nurse briefly paused with him next to my face, and all I had eyes for were his tightly closed eyes, his sobbing mouth. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

My son was four pounds when he was born, and I worried about him in his incubator, anxious over his weight, his colour, the flap of his feet over his legs. I learned how to massage him to help his development and digestion. He was all stomach and head, and when I held him to feed him, I marvelled at how thin his skin seemed. How fragile he seemed. But he seemed to have little regard for my trepidation. From his first weeks of life, he ate voraciously, sucking down bottles of milk easily, latching even though his mouth should have been too small, his cheek muscles too weak. Once I took him home, he gained weight quickly, armoured himself in fat. He developed fine motor skills on par with children born on time. My son, it seemed, was up for the fight to live.

When his face grew to a fat moon, my son smiled and showed dimples as deep as my father's. He charmed. When he flies with me, he stands in my lap and babbles to everyone boarding the plane. He leans over to our row mates and caresses the other passenger's arms. White ladies with perfect teeth wearing impeccably tailored clothing smile at his sure, chubby fingers.

"He's adorable," they say.

White men with crew cuts, ruddy necks and weathered faces, grin at him. "I'm sorry," I tell them. "He likes to touch people."

"It's OK," they reply. "He's so friendly!"

They reach out a finger so he will grab it, so he will shake their hand. He gives them a high five, then my boy turns to the window to shriek and slap the glass, to attempt to converse with the luggage handlers. I hug his soft bottom, his doughy legs, and wonder at what age my wispy-haired, social boy will learn that he can't reach out his hand to every stranger. I wonder how old he will be when the immaculate ladies flinch. When the ruddy men will see a shadow of a gun in his open palm. I know it will happen before he turns 17, since this is how old [Trayvon Martin](#) was when George Zimmerman stalked him through the streets of a Florida suburb and killed him. I know it will happen before he turns 14, since this is how old [Emmett Till](#) was when Carolyn Bryant lied that he whistled at her, and then Roy Bryant and John William Milam kidnapped him, beat him, and mutilated him before dumping him into the Tallahatchie river. I know it will happen before he turns 12, since this is how old [Tamir Rice](#) was when police spotted him playing with a toy gun in a park and shot him twice in the abdomen so that he died the next day.

To be safe, I decide I should tell him about his ghostly brothers by the time he is 10. I should tell him about Trayvon, about Emmett, about Tamir, before he enters puberty, before he loses his baby fat, before his voice deepens and his chest broadens. I have nine years to figure out how I will answer his first question about his phantom siblings: Why? Why did they die? I am grateful for the time I have to formulate my reply. But I am also angry, because I know when I answer his question about all the black people America has broken, stolen, ground down, and killed, I will be denying his childhood. Burdening him with understanding beyond his years. Darkening his innocence. That the reality of living as a black person, a black man in America will require me to cut short my lovely, gap-toothed boy's childhood. In these moments, I think I know a little of what it must have been like for those runaway parents, who bent their children silent and blind to grant them adulthood. That I know a little of what it must have felt like to snatch bolls in the fields, to hear the soft-bellied baby crying and deny the infant milk. To deny your child the gift of childhood in the hopes you can raise them to adulthood.

I hope my boy is lucky. I hope he is never in the wrong time at the wrong place on the wrong end of a weapon. I hope he is never vulnerable with those who wish to harm him. I hope I love him enough in the time I have with him, that while he can be a child, I give him the gifts of a childhood: that I bake chocolate chip cookies and whisper stories to him at bedtime and let him jump in muddy puddles after heavy rains, so he can know what it is to burst with joy. I hope he survives his early adolescence with a kernel of that joy lodged in his heart, wrapped in the fodder of my love. I hope his natural will to thrive, to fight to thrive, is strong. I hope I never fail him. I hope he sees 12 and 21 and 40 and 62. I hope he and his sister bury me. I hope. I hope. I hope.

