

'Blazing with power, grief and tenderness' *Financial Times*

'A must'
Margaret
Atwood

'Hauntingly
lyrical'
*Mail on
Sunday*



Jesmyn Ward
Sing, Unburied, Sing

BLOOMSBURY

Jesmyn Ward
Sing, Unburied, Sing

B L O O M S B U R Y P U B L I S H I N G
L O N D O N • O X F O R D • N E W Y O R K • N E W D E L H I • S Y D N E Y

Chapter 9

RICHIE

I know Jojo is innocent because I can read it in the unmarked swell of him: his smooth face, ripe with baby fat; his round, full stomach; his hands and feet soft as his younger sister's. He looks even younger when he falls asleep. 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. When I was thirteen, I knew much more than him. I knew that metal shackles could grow into the skin. I knew that leather could split flesh like butter. I knew that hunger could hurt, could scoop me hollow as a gourd, and that seeing my siblings starving could hollow out a different part of me, too. Could make my heart ricochet through my chest desperately. I watch Jojo and Kayla's sprawled sleep and wonder if I ever slept like that when I was young. I wonder if Riv ever looked at me and saw a wild, naïve thing in the cot next to him. I wonder if he felt pity. Or if there was more love. Jojo snores to a snort and stops, and I feel something in my chest, where my heart would be if I were still alive, soften toward him.

* * *

I didn't understand time, either, when I was young. How could I know that after I died, Parchman would pull me from the sky? How could I imagine Parchman would pull me to it and refuse to let go? And how could I conceive that Parchman was past, present, and future all at once? That the history and sentiment that carved the place out of the wilderness would show me that time is a vast ocean, and that everything is happening at once?

I was trapped, as trapped as I'd been in the room of pines where I woke up. Trapped as I was before the white snake, the black vulture, came for me. Parchman had imprisoned me again. I wandered the new prison, night after night. It was a place bound by cinder blocks and cement. I watched the men fuck and fight in the dark, so twisted up in each other I couldn't tell where one man ended and another began. I spent so many turns of the earth at the new Parchman. I watched for the dark bird, but he was absent. I despaired, burrowed into the dirt, slept, and rose to witness the newborn Parchman: I watched chained men clear the land and lay the first logs for the first barracks for gunmen and trusty shooters. 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. Their faces in the blue light were stiff as corpses. I burrowed and slept and woke many times before I realized this was the nature of time.

It was a small mercy that I never surfaced in the old Parchman, the one where Riv and I lived. I only visited that Parchman in memory, memories that rose like bubbles of decay to the surface of a swamp. Riv had a woman in Parchman; she shines golden in the dark blanket of memory that surrounds me when I sleep. She was a prostitute who serviced the Black men in the prison, and she looked like she could have been my mama, skinny as me, as dark, eyes inky like the trees when night falls. She wore a lot of yellow. I asked Riv once why he liked her and he told me that was something I would know when I was older. I asked him if he loved her, and he shook his head and I wondered if there was somebody he loved down on the Gulf, some saltwater girl.

It was that yellow-wearing woman, that Sunshine Woman, all the other men called her, who told me and Riv about the lynching. It was her last day at Parchman, but neither of us knew it, and she sat with her arms across her chest and one hand covering her mouth, watching the trusty shooters. We sat in a corner of the yard, in the shade of a shed, and she told us about the latest hanged man. *Was a Black man, she said, from outside of Natchez.* He went into town one day with his lady, and he didn't get off the sidewalk when a White woman walked by. *Stepped too close to her, Sunshine Woman said, and brushed up against her real close-like. Felt her softness through her clothes,* Sunshine Woman

said. *The White woman spat, cursed the Black man and woman, and the Black woman say she sorry. That her man ain't mean to do it.* Sunshine Woman thought the truth of it was he didn't want his woman to have to step down into the street, as it was rutted with puddles because there had been bad rains and flooding. Maybe the Black man was prideful, thought he could be courteous to his woman, keep her walking and clean. *She was wearing her best dress,* Sunshine Woman said. The White woman went home and told her husband that the Black man molested her and his woman disrespected her. The Black man and woman were on their way home when the mob caught up with them. *That's them,* the White woman said, *that's them right there.* Sunshine Woman said it was over a hundred of them. The people from the community saw all the lights out there, the torches and lanterns that lit up the night to dawn.

And that's when Sunshine Woman started to whisper. She said their people went out in the woods and found them the next day. Said the mob beat them so bad they eyes disappeared in they swollen heads. There was wax paper and sausage wrappings and bare corncobs all over the ground. The man was missing his fingers, his toes, and his genitals. The woman was missing her teeth. Both of them were hanged, and the ground all around the roots of the tree was smoking because the mob had set the couple afire, too. *A person ain't safe,* Sunshine Woman said, *and that's why this the last you seeing of me around here, Riv. I'm heading north to Chicago with my auntie and uncle, she said, and you be a fool if you don't come north when you get out.*

Riv looked like he had swallowed something nasty, some

bug or a rock in his meal, and he said: *Naw, Sunshine Woman, I got to go back south.* Riv glanced at me and said: *Maybe you shouldn't have told both us that story. Maybe you should have waited.*

He grown enough to be in here, Riv, Sunshine Woman said. That mean he grown enough to know.

Riv had pulled his arm from her then and stepped out into the sun.

Just 'cause he in here don't mean he can bear that. He shouldn't have to, Riv said.

Sunshine Woman seemed disappointed in Riv, angry, but she hooked her hand through his arm even though it look like it hurt her to do so, and she said: *I'm sorry, Riv. Sorry, boy.* She pulled him away, and they left me standing in the lee of the building. I looked up at the rusted tin of the walls and realized I could have told Sunshine Woman that she hadn't told me something I didn't already know. I wondered if that would have made Riv less angry with her. Once, when I was playing in the woods with my brothers and sisters, we found what had once been a man, hanging from a tree. He was a short man, short as me, but rubbery with rot and stinking and his mouth was open like he was grinning. That grin was the devil. My little brothers and sisters ran home screaming, and when I walked into the house, my mama slapped my face for being the oldest and leading us where we shouldn't go. But when I thought about the way Riv admonished Sunshine Woman, how he stepped away from her to protect me, I began to understand love. I began to understand that what Riv and Sunshine Woman did wasn't an expression of love, but Riv's standing in the

sun for me was. I sagged and sat on the ground with the weight of it. I wanted to call to Sunshine Woman and tell her I would do it: I would go north when I was free. Riv looked back at me and his eyes were glassy and dark; it was as if he could hear my thoughts, as if he knew what I wanted to say. As I watched Sunshine Woman pull Riv away from me, I felt a stinging in my toes, in my soles, in my legs, up my butt, and through my back, where it burst to fire in my bones, licking all through my ribs, a loose powerful feeling, like a voice freed from a throat, a screaming note all through me, and it was then I knew I was going to run.