

Coldwater

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We pile into the rented minivan, more people than seats. Set out for our customary voyage back to sweltering Mississippi, a summer “vacation” every black child Up South would take. We eat cold cuts and cheese product sliced, quartered, and packed back in the bag. Children cramp unbuckled on the floor scarfing down “sweat sandwiches.” We stop for gas and piss breaks at stations where we see women climbing in and out of semitrucks. Grandma demands we not enter the restroom alone. After half a day’s drive south, we make it to the town of Coldwater. The place where my mother was born of a dry birth on a couch in her mother’s house. My great-grandmother, Dewdrop, stands waiting at the door. The smell of fresh biscuits swirls the air around her head-ragged hair. And the memory stops there: the romanticizing of a South I never had to live in. One I stopped visiting after enough people died and the funerals became further apart. This homemade recollection is not the part of my great-grandmother that stayed. It was instead the lessons on land and how not to lose it. The frankness about men and how to tell on them if they touched me wrong. How being smart meant that you could clean a house well. How she cleaned white women’s houses once upon a time. How there was a story about her being called a monkey and brazenly flashing her ass to prove to a white child she did not, in fact, have a tail. The way we laughed when she told us, “You can’t talk to white folks like that,” whenever we

did things like complain about service. How I realized later, for her, it wasn't a joke. How she said "did" in so many inflections, she could articulate every emotion in three letters. How later I learned the meaning of prescriptive grammar. How she didn't go through much school, but she could read and write. How I keep the handwritten letters she wrote me with all kinds of subversive, simple advice, telling me things like "Know everybody smile at you not your friends, just be aware of that, just keep't'awalking." How I wrote back and keep writing because so much has been erased. How no matter what story I tell, everything always comes back to the water.

