

To the Bone

Daily, a piece of crackling bread, a bowl of boiled turnips, fried fat back. Pa and the boys would get extra pieces of the salty meat whenever there was any to be had. They worked at the mill and needed their strength. Sometimes Pa would save the tough meat rinds and sneak them to me before he left for work. Whenever I'd feel faint while boiling shirts, I'd stick a piece in my mouth, letting the smoky flavor of his kindness fill me up. I learned early how to live on bone and gristle.

At least I got to suck the marrow of bones and gnaw on juicy gristle. Aletha Ruffin was so skinny, her cheeks sunk in where her teeth used to be. They called her Chicken Legs. Her hair was a thin nest of wire and husk. When she smiled, you thought death was coming. Once, Mama sent me to school with a buttermilk biscuit stuffed with pear preserves, and Aletha let the waters of her mouth run, just like a dog waiting for scraps at the back door. What could I do but give it to her? She grabbed the biscuit without a thank you, and never looked me in the eye again. They say the county came and took away the Ruffin children, but sometimes I wonder if they just dwindled down to nothing, and disappeared.

There are ways to keep from dwindling down to nothing. Eat from the root, savor the skins. Feast on gizzards, tongues and hearts. Sop your bread in pot liquor. Scrape crackling from the pan to make gravy taste like a meal. Lard your belly. Trade a nickel for a pickle so sour, it

will lock your jaws. When your eyes start to sparkle and your hips round out, sway sweetly in front of a man, like a ripened berry ready to be plucked.

The blackberries were ripe for plucking the summer I swayed in front of Thalius Jones. In the back of his uncle's pickup, he sunk his teeth into my tender flesh and gripped the rounds of my hips. "Girl, you give a man something to hold on to," he said. That Christmas, he brought Mama two bright oranges, and Pa a bunch of raisins still on the vine. We got married in the spring. When I sat at the table with Thalius, he spooned his turnips into my bowl. "Eat up," he said. "I'ma have me a big, fat baby."

Tessie was a big, fat baby. Everywhere I went, folks would draw in a breath and say, "Ooo-wee. Look at that girl!" I'd shine her up with Vaseline, gather her thick hair in a bow and parade her at the Five and Dime. I walked one-sided with her on my hip. When Thalius would come home in the evenings from the post office, the kitchen would be heavy with the smell of fried pork chops and onions. He'd holler, "Where's my big-boned girls?" Until the day she grew up and got married, Tessie would always run to him first. He'd cup her moon face with both hands, let his thumbs run over her velvet skin and tell her that she was the prettiest girl in the world.

My granddaughter, Madison, has the velvety complexion that her mom always had, and a face as wide and self-satisfied as the moon's. She used to let me pinch her delicious thighs, and she blushed when Thalius called her "Pork Pie." But now Madison's thirteen and growing up; she gets mad at the things that used to make her smile. Last week, I took her school shopping for a pair of those jeans that fit like the skin of an onion. The lady in the store frowned and said, "We don't carry those in large sizes, sweetie." The moon went into shadow, and I couldn't cheer Madison up even with a bowl of Haagen-Dazs.

The moon is shadowed by evening clouds as I set a bowl of my home cooking in front of Madison. At sixteen, she is now so thin, I worry how she will ever become a blackberry, ripe for picking. “Eat,” I say, spooning Madison more food. She eyes my prosperous waist. “No, thanks, Nanny,” she says politely. Her eyes have no sparkle, like eyes of the alabaster girls in magazines. She pushes around the food I have cooked for her, but I eat without shame: braised turnips, ham and crackling bread.