



ALSO BY JESMYN WARD

Let Us Descend

Navigate Your Stars

Sing, Unburied, Sing

The Fire This Time

Men We Reaped

Salvage the Bones

Where the Line Bleeds

On Witness and Repair

Essays

JESMYN WARD

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Excerpt from "Reasons to Live" by Ruth Awad from *Outside the Joy* (Third Man Books, 2024).

To Dorothy Temple, my maternal grandmother:

*spellbinding storyteller,
fearless singer,
ecstatic dancer,
and smart enough to pass the GED
with a grade school formal education.*

She ate life whole. I miss her every moment, every day.

*Because if you can survive
the violet night, you can survive*

*The next, and the fig tree will ache
with sweetness*

—from “Reasons to Live” by Ruth Awad

*I'm aware, you know, that I and the people I love may
perish in the morning. I know that. But there's light in our
faces now.*

—James Baldwin

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Introduction

I FIRST SAW THE MISSISSIPPI STATE AUTHORS MAP WHEN I was in elementary school. I felt such awe looking at that map, studying the sometimes kind, oftentimes serious illustrated faces of the writers: William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Richard Wright beamed the brightest in my childhood memory. I was too young for their work then, but as I sat in that linoleum-tiled library with its metal bookshelves and strong fluorescent lighting, that map, along with the books lining the shelves, transformed the space into something expansive and precious.

I sat at those long tables and sank into story; their authors transported me so completely that I tasted the food the characters ate, the tea they drank, and felt every little tic of terror or joy or sadness they felt. Writers were magic-workers. They spun tales from the ether, wrote narratives so riveting that I often felt a kind of overwhelming longing as I read. I could

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already sense the worlds they constructed, already felt so much with the characters; why couldn't I just step through from my world into theirs? Even at the tender age of eight, I knew I was poor and Black in Mississippi, and that meant eating WIC-issued cornflakes and never being sated by them. That meant being too hot for most of the year, and being too cold the rest because we didn't have any central climate control in any of our homes. It meant hardly ever experiencing the luxury of solitude because I spent many of my childhood years growing up in a house where aunts and uncles and my parents and my first cousins all lived together, by necessity.

Reading offered respite from all of this, but as I grew, I found myself seeking less escapism. As I grew, I understood that being Black and poor in Mississippi also meant Sunday baseball games at the local Negro-league park, everyone communing and eating and celebrating. It meant swimming with everyone in our community at the local river, camping and cooking over open fires. It meant gathering for birthdays and anniversaries and just because, playing Al Green and Otis Redding and Denise LaSalle and dancing, old with young, babies with seniors, whirling in golden living rooms, amber kitchens, on pale blue porches. This understanding led me to wanting more empathy, more feeling, and it was then I was ready to engage with those famous Mississippi writers from the map.

I began with Welty first; I muddled my way through her short stories, grinning at her sly wit, before alighting in her essays. I fought my way through Faulkner, half understanding

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what was happening, feeling thunderous import lurking in the margins of every page. Even though I struggled with some of their work (Welty's essays on jazz musicians soured me, Faulkner's story about the bear frustrated me), I recognized their power, their magic. I appreciated the way Faulkner wrote the reader into a kind of fever dream of the South, the way Welty invited the reader into the story and made one feel as if they were chums, in on a marvelous joke. But Wright struck me in the marrow, moving me. I read Wright's memoir, *Black Boy*, and when he wrote about being a young, deeply feeling boy in the Mississippi Delta, I knew him. I knew him when he shimmied under houses to play in the shade of the foundation, seeking some reprieve from the Southern heat. I knew him when he opened his mouth under the spigot to drink water to fill his stomach with something, anything, as hunger wrung him; I'd done the same as a child, gulped down faucet water that smelled like sulfur, tasted of minerals. Wright worked a different kind of magic for me: it was elemental. He pushed me so far out of my own experience and crowded me so completely into his own that for a time, we became one, and when I emerged from his memoir, all that he had confirmed and questioned in his narrative rang through me with the endless echo of a great bell. By the time I read Wright, I knew I wanted to be a writer, too, that I wanted to work a little of the magic Wright had for me: that I hoped to reach some other young, solitary, hungry person in the world, barefoot and heartsore, desperate for story to help them figure out their lives, this world.

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But something about Wright's memoir was unsettling for me. He left Mississippi, traveled north, and joined the Communist Party. I didn't necessarily disagree with his politics; I admit that I knew so little about communism that I couldn't form an opinion. It was his leaving his home that most bruised me. It was the rancor with which he wrote about his early life, the details of the poverty he experienced, the violence at the hands of friends and family, the fact that there was little to no warmth, little to no connection, that disturbed me. What kept him alive in Mississippi? I knew what had kept me alive: my grandmother letting me perch easily in her lap, her lipstick messy as she told story after story and laughed. My father, muscled and beautiful, lifting me to the back of his motorcycle, jamming a helmet down on my skull after securing Walkman headphones on my ears, and then hitting play as he pulled out of my elementary school parking lot, Prince's guitar warping the tunnel of trees around us. My mother standing behind me at the stove, whisking the spoon steadily along the bottom of the pan, teaching me how quickly pecan candy should be stirred. My brother and sisters, piled into my mother's small car, fighting with our elbows for more space in the back seat, combatants and companions at once, comfort in knowing that being packed like tinned fish in the car meant we were together.

I knew something or someone had kept Wright alive, but I couldn't easily decipher who or what had done so in *Black Boy*. His refusal to give me a glimpse of that which nurtured him in his life and gave him the wherewithal to escape taught

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me this about creative nonfiction: I wanted to look squarely at the place and people who made me, and to do my best to write with honesty, generosity, and that admittedly tortured love I feel for Mississippi. A love heavy with hanging moss and overarching live oaks, heavy with one great-grandfather shot and killed by whites who accused him of flirting with a white woman in a local store, with another slaughtered in the forest at the side of his moonshine still, with the specter of my maternal grandmother made to ride in a trunk to cross a sundown town safely, which marked her so deeply she told me that story multiple times during her life—which marked me so deeply in the hearing that I tell it as she did, again and again.

It took years, but I wrote toward nuance as well as I could. It is strange to sit with the essays in this collection, seasons of work, now that my small, grinning picture is on the Mississippi Literary Map, too, my face settled squarely over DeLisle. It is unsettling to sit with these short narratives written from the meat of my life: luscious as a fresh oyster in the mouth, undercut with brine. Those first essays were chock-full of raw salt; the first essay I wrote, which was about Hurricane Katrina, wasn't elegant. It wasn't even complete. I wrote it out of a kind of desperation because I wanted to remember the details of the storm and its aftermath, so that is what I put down first: the facts of the storm surge, the flood, the desperate swim from my grandmother's submerged home, being turned away by the white family, and being consigned to sit in an open field, where we witnessed those Category 5 hurricane winds peeling

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the face of the earth away. How it pushed the water toward us, inexorably. That first essay was an exercise in memory that I secreted away in my files, and it took me a long time to return to it, to attempt to make something of it, to process the memory through the lens of myself. To write toward that which kept me alive: following the careful line of my family out of my grandmother's drowning house, our tender backs to the pelting rain, swimming shoeless through the storm surge, grasping together toward survival.

There's a fair gap between that first published essay and the rest. I wrote "We Don't Swim in Our Cemeteries" before my first novel was published, but even when all I had was a few weak short stories, a tentative novel, and two narrative essays, I still thought of myself as a novelist. I'm digressive, like my maternal grandmother. I can be long-winded, like my father. I take my time telling a story, like my mother, letting a narrative unspool over years. Short stories and short-form creative nonfiction are not conducive to the kind of writing that comes naturally to me. I'll also admit that I was carrying some doubt from my undergraduate years, wherein I'd struggled with academic essay writing so much that a TA once told me that I could not, in fact, write. According to her, I was deluding myself into thinking I could.

In a way, she was correct. Academic essays required a kind of bloodless precision, focus, and clarity that I hardly ever possessed. Narrative essays required the opposite: a willingness to explore, to sit with the questions, to sometimes fail in finding an answer. In the doing, to write toward revelation. I learned

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that if I held the narrative loosely to me, following where it pulled, I could discover facts and realities about myself and those I loved that I did not know when I set down the first word. This promise has led me through every essay over the years, enabling a kind of self-transformation on the page.

When I came to creative nonfiction in graduate school, I learned pretty quickly how the form would serve me. First, it would allow me to write toward the pain that I carried, which was myriad. I'd spent much of my adolescence mourning my parents' divorce, my father's absence, my mother's distance, the dissolution I saw in my community. How that pain wished to mute me. But at the same time, I'd always found sustenance in Black art—in music and film and TV and literature that wrestled with the pain and irrepressible genius and beauty of Black life. Black art had given me various keys to understand who I was and why I lived the life that I did. Black art had given me companionship, had enabled me to feel less alone. And finally, Black art had made me feel seen and authenticated.

Sometimes, I think I'm writing for a past version of myself: that sixteen-year-old girl who argued with her history teacher about social norms and nature. I can't recall how those arguments began, but I remember pushing back against my teacher's lecture, saying: But what if someone grows up with different ideas about life and what is right? Is it fair to judge them easily, not to take into account what they've learned in their life? I wasn't arguing for excusing violent crime; I was arguing for sight, for being aware that life is tough for all of us and acknowledging context is important. I was arguing for

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empathy. My argument was clumsy and barely articulate, but imperfect as it was, it felt important to say. All I could think about was my brother, downy hair on his upper lip, limbs grown too long too fast, so that he felt awkward in his body. I was thinking about his friends, my friends, all the boys I'd grown up with in my neighborhood who were making adult decisions about hustling, about sex, about relationships and family and responsibility, when their brains and hearts were half developed at best. How I loved their juvenile duplicity, their jokes, their silliness, their unexpected, quiet profundity that hit like heat lightning. Here, we sit with the immaculate joy of a nighttime ride, country rap tunes blaring from the stereo, trees nodding to the beat. I wanted somebody to see them. I wanted somebody to see us. I wanted to feel less alone in this invisibility.

It took me years of reading and years of writing these essays to understand: That somebody is me. That somebody is you. I'm here and you're here, and we're figuring it out and feeling it together. We meet here, awash in the detritus of life, of death, of grief, of childbirth. Here, we sit with the immaculate joy of two boys leaping from a bridge into a river. We sit with the hard-won pleasures of age: strong coffee in the morning, a good book at day's close, the faint discomfort of half-remembered adolescent heartbreak. We sit with the grandmother killed by dementia, the great-grandfather dead of cancer, the great-aunt murdered by the slow savagery of type 2 diabetes. We sit with the toddler gleaming joy from sticking his finger down his throat to gag, his glee as he witnesses our horrified reaction, and we

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sit patiently as the next child listens to the same pop song for the twentieth time and we recall our marathon replay of the *Thriller* album when it came out. We live here at the bottom of this black delta, this state sunken by the weight of time, riddled with blood and bones buried deep, shaken by the stomp of the living on top.

Come sit with me. Let me tell you a story.

—*Jesmyn Ward, 2025*

On Witness and Repair

Why Fiction Matters

MY MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER, DOROTHY, WAS BORN in 1940, delivered by a midwife. She shared her mother's womb with a twin who was stillborn, named Shirley Temple, who did not survive her entry into this world. Baby Shirley came out of my great-grandmother Mary with a deep indentation in her forehead, and she never breathed. Later, my great-grandma Mary told my grandmother Dorothy that she felt guilty for her baby's death. Mary had worked hard through her pregnancy, scrubbing and washing and weeding and harvesting, and once, she said, she picked up a metal tub full of washed clothes, heavy with water, and the rim hit her pregnant belly. When my great-grandmother saw the indentation on the infant's forehead, she thought: *My fault*.

Shirley was buried in a segregated graveyard under live oaks, on a bayou. My great-grandparents buried her in a shoebox. My great-grandmother Mary was so despondent at the