

Whippoorwill, Sing

*by Oubria Tronshaw*

The rooster's call snatched Hattie and Bill from fitful sleep. They locked gazes in the pale light, her eyes widened and she inhaled sharply.

"Oh!" she breathed, "that was a hard one." Her hand swam under the covers in search of her husband's fingers. Finding them balled in a tight fist, she coaxed him, "That's yours kickin', Bill. None of his was this strong."

Bill sighed; he placed his palm on her swollen belly. "Maybe." He shook his head and pulled away, hiding his eyes. "He..." his voice faltered. "He still gon' take the baby."

Hattie turned her back to him and sat on the edge of the bed. The sun filtered through the single window, illuminating her pregnant brown moon. She stared out at the sky, watching the red fingers of dawn bleed into morning. "I'll fix breakfast." She plucked her housedress from the floor and tugged it over her swollen frame. "You better get yo' clothes on."

Before leaving for the fields, Bill bent and hugged her. Hattie's heart pounded against his ribs, its tempo intermittently matched by the baby's kicks.

When the sun was a high, blazing orange, the pains began. She cried and pushed and farted, while the midwife heaved and pulled. At the end of the blood the baby's cries pierced the hush of the summer heat. Mother and son slept; the midwife crept gravely home.

Hattie awoke to heavy footsteps. The panic began as a low growl in her throat, and then tucked itself into a whimper. She clutched the baby to her chest. Her words tumbled from her lips, a spew of futility, "look, he's dark...he won't bring no money, don't take him..."

"I ain't gon' sell him", Master interrupted. He leaned towards her bundle. "I just came to make sure he was full breed nigger, like the midwife said." Hattie pulled back the tiny blanket and lifted her son into the dwindling light. Master nodded, and walked to door. He paused at the threshold, staring out at the dusk. "I was counting on that money, though." He scratched his beard. "Half-white babies bring in as much as a full grown man." He turned to face her, his eyes white in the inky darkness. "I sold Bill to break even."