



ALSO BY JACQUELINE WOODSON

*Harbour Me*

*Before the Ever After*

*Last Summer with Maizon*

*The Dear One*

*Maizon at Blue Hill*

*Between Madison and Palmetto*

*I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*

*From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*

*The House You Pass on the Way*

*If You Come Softly*

*Lena*

*Miracle's Boys*

*Hush*

*Locomotion*

*Behind You*

*Feathers*

*After Tupac and D Foster*

*Peace, Locomotion*

*Beneath a Meth Moon*

The background of the cover is a light gray, intricate illustration of floral and butterfly motifs. It features elegant, swirling lines that resemble vines or stylized flowers, interspersed with numerous small, delicate butterfly silhouettes. The overall aesthetic is soft and dreamlike, complementing the title.

# Brown Girl Dreaming

**JACQUELINE  
WOODSON**

Orion

ORION CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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*This book is for my family –  
past, present and future.*

*With love.*



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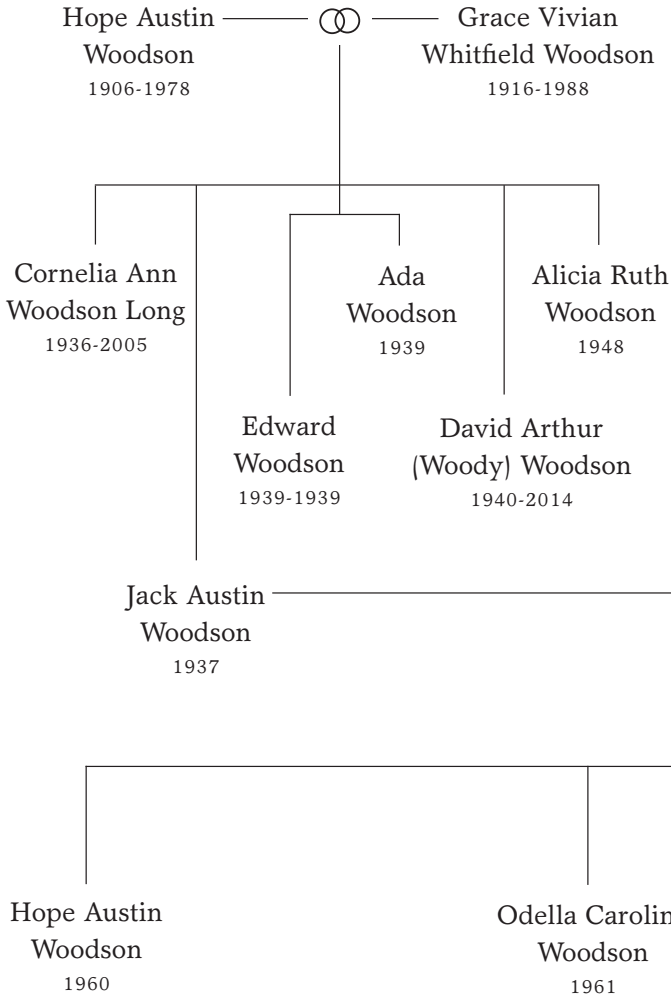
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WOODSON FAMILY TREE





# IRBY FAMILY TREE



Gunnar Irby ———— ○○ ———— Georgiana Scott Irby  
1911-1970 1913-2001

Odell Irby  
1939-1960

Caroline  
(Kay) Irby  
1941-1969

Robert Irby  
1944-1988



Mary Ann Irby  
1942-2008

Jacqueline  
Amanda  
Woodson  
1963

Roman  
Woodson  
1966



Hold fast to dreams  
For if dreams die  
Life is a broken-winged bird  
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams  
For when dreams go  
Life is a barren field  
Frozen with snow.

- Langston Hughes

A black and white photograph of a cloudy sky. The clouds are scattered and vary in density, with some appearing as soft, wispy clouds and others as more defined, darker shapes. In the lower right quadrant, there is a bright, circular light source, likely the sun or moon, which is partially obscured by a large, faint, circular lens flare or halo effect. The overall tone is monochromatic and atmospheric.

PART I

i am born

february 12, 1963

I am born on a Tuesday at University Hospital  
Columbus, Ohio,  
USA -  
a country caught

between Black and White.

I am born not long from the time  
or far from the place  
where  
my great-great-grandparents  
worked the deep rich land  
unfree  
dawn till dusk  
unpaid  
drank cool water from scooped-out gourds  
looked up and followed  
the sky's mirrored constellation  
to freedom.

I am born as the South explodes,  
too many people too many years

enslaved, then emancipated  
but not free, the people  
who look like me  
keep fighting  
and marching  
and getting killed  
so that today -  
February 12, 1963  
and every day from this moment on,  
brown children like me can grow up  
free. Can grow up  
learning and voting and walking and riding  
wherever we want.

I am born in Ohio but  
the stories of South Carolina already run  
like rivers  
through my veins.

## second daughter's second day on earth

My birth certificate says: Female Negro  
Mother: Mary Anne Irby, 22, Negro  
Father: Jack Austin Woodson, 25, Negro

In Birmingham, Alabama, Martin Luther King Jr.  
is planning a march on Washington, where  
John F. Kennedy is president.  
In Harlem, Malcolm X is standing on a soapbox  
talking about a revolution.

*Outside the window of University Hospital,  
snow is slowly falling. So much already  
covers this vast Ohio ground.*

In Montgomery, only seven years have passed  
since Rosa Parks refused  
to give up  
her seat on a city bus.

*I am born brown-skinned, black-haired  
and wide-eyed.  
I am born Negro here and Coloured there*

and somewhere else,  
the Freedom Singers have linked arms,  
their protests rising into song:  
*Deep in my heart, I do believe  
that we shall overcome someday.*

and somewhere else, James Baldwin  
is writing about injustice, each novel,  
each essay, changing the world.

*I do not yet know who I'll be  
what I'll say  
how I'll say it . . .*

Not even three years have passed since a brown girl  
named Ruby Bridges  
walked into an all-white school.  
Armed guards surrounded her while hundreds  
of white people spat and called her names.

She was six years old.

*I do not know if I'll be strong like Ruby.  
I do not know what the world will look like  
when I am finally able to walk, speak, write . . .  
Another Buckeye!  
the nurse says to my mother.  
Already, I am being named for this place.*

*Ohio. The Buckeye State.*

*My fingers curl into fists, automatically*

*This is the way, my mother said,  
of every baby's hand.*

*I do not know if these hands will become*

*Malcolm's – raised and fisted  
or Martin's – open and asking  
or James's – curled around a pen.*

*I do not know if these hands will be*

*Rosa's*

*or Ruby's*

*gently gloved*

*and fiercely folded*

*calmly in a lap,*

*on a desk,*

*around a book,*

*ready*

*to change the world . . .*

## a girl named jack

*Good enough name for me, my father said  
the day I was born.*

*Don't see why  
she can't have it, too.*

But the women said no.

My mother first.

Then each aunt, pulling my pink blanket back  
patting the crop of thick curls  
tugging at my new toes  
touching my cheeks.

*We won't have a girl named Jack, my mother said.*

And my father's sisters whispered,

*A boy named Jack was bad enough.*

But only so my mother could hear.

*Name a girl Jack, my father said,  
and she can't help but*

*grow up strong.*

*Raise her right, my father said,*

*and she'll make that name her own.*



*Name a girl Jack  
and people will look at her twice, my father said.*

*For no good reason but to ask if her parents  
were crazy, my mother said.*

And back and forth it went until I was Jackie  
and my father left the hospital mad.

My mother said to my aunts,  
*Hand me that pen, wrote  
Jacqueline* where it asked for a name.  
Jacqueline, just in case  
someone thought to drop the *ie*.

Jacqueline, just in case  
I grew up and wanted something a little bit longer  
and further away from  
Jack.

## the woodsons of ohio

My father's family  
can trace their history back  
to Thomas Woodson of Chillicothe, said to be  
the first son  
of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings  
some say  
this isn't so but . . .

the Woodsons of Ohio know  
what the Woodsons coming before them  
left behind, in Bibles, in stories,  
in history coming down through time

so

ask any Woodson why  
you can't go down the Woodson line  
without  
finding  
doctors and lawyers and teachers  
athletes and scholars and people in government  
they'll say,

*We had a head start.*  
They'll say,  
*Thomas Woodson expected the best of us.*  
They'll lean back, lace their fingers  
across their chests,  
smile a smile that's older than time, say,

*Well it all started back before Thomas Jefferson*  
*Woodson of Chillicothe . . .*

and they'll begin to tell our long, long story.

## the ghosts of the nelsonville house

The Woodsons are one  
of the few Black families in this town, their house  
is big and white and sits  
on a hill.

Look up  
to see them  
through the high windows  
inside a kitchen filled with the light  
of a watery Nelsonville sun. In the parlour  
a fireplace burns warmth  
into the long Ohio winter.

Keep looking and it's spring again,  
the light's gold now, and dancing  
across the pine floors.

Once, there were so many children here  
running through this house  
up and down the stairs, hiding under beds  
and in trunks,

sneaking into the kitchen for tiny pieces  
of icebox cake, cold fried chicken,  
thick slices of their mother's honey ham . . .

Once, my father was a baby here  
and then he was a boy . . .

But that was a long time ago.

In the photos my grandfather is taller than everybody  
and my grandmother just an inch smaller.

On the walls their children run through fields,  
play in pools,  
dance in teen-filled rooms, all of them

grown up and gone now –  
but wait!

Look closely:

There's Aunt Alicia, the baby girl,  
curls spiralling over her shoulders, her hands  
cupped around a bouquet of flowers. Only  
four years old in that picture, and already,  
a reader.

Beside Alicia another picture, my father, Jack,

the oldest boy.  
Eight years old and mad about something  
or is it someone  
we cannot see?

In another picture, my uncle Woody,  
baby boy  
laughing and pointing  
the Nelsonville house behind him and maybe  
his brother at the end of his pointed finger.

My aunt Anne in her nurse's uniform,  
my aunt Ada in her university sweater  
*Buckeye to the bone . . .*

The children of Hope and Grace.

Look closely. There I am  
in the furrow of Jack's brow,  
in the slyness of Alicia's smile,  
in the bend of Grace's hand . . .

There I am . . .

Beginning.

it'll be scary  
sometimes

My great-great-grandfather on my father's side  
was born free in Ohio,

1832.

Built his home and farmed his land,  
then dug for coal when the farming  
wasn't enough. Fought hard  
in the war. His name in stone now  
on the Civil War Memorial:

*William J. Woodson*  
*United States Coloured Troops,*  
*Union, Company B 5th Regt.*

A long time dead but living still  
among the other soldiers  
on that monument in Washington, D.C.

His son was sent to Nelsonville  
lived with an aunt

William Woodson  
the only brown boy in an all-white school.

*You'll face this in your life someday,  
my mother will tell us  
over and over again.  
A moment when you walk into a room and*

*no one there is like you.*

*It'll be scary sometimes. But think of William Woodson  
and you'll be all right.*



## football dreams

No one was faster  
than my father on the football field.  
No one could keep him  
from crossing the line. Then  
touching down again.  
Coaches were watching the way he moved,  
his easy stride, his long arms reaching  
up, snatching the ball from its soft pocket  
of air.

My father dreamed football dreams,  
and woke to a scholarship  
at Ohio State University.  
Grown now  
living the big-city life  
in Columbus  
just sixty miles  
from Nelsonville  
and from there  
Interstate 70 could get you  
on your way west to Chicago  
Interstate 77 could take you south

but my father said  
no coloured Buckeye in his right mind  
would ever want to go there.

*From Columbus, my father said,  
you could go just about  
anywhere.*

## other people's memory

*You were born in the morning, Grandma Georgiana said.  
I remember the sound of the birds. Mean  
old blue jays squawking. They like to fight, you know.  
Don't mess with blue jays!  
I hear they can kill a cat if they get mad enough.*

*And then the phone was ringing.  
Through all that static and squawking, I heard  
your mama telling me you'd come.  
Another girl, I stood there thinking,  
so close to the first one.  
Just like your mama and Caroline. Not even  
a year between them and so close, you could hardly tell  
where one ended and the other started.  
And that's how I know you came in the morning.  
That's how I remember.*

*You came in the late afternoon, my mother said.  
Two days after I turned twenty-two.  
Your father was at work.  
Took a rush hour bus  
trying*

*to get to you. But  
by the time he arrived,  
you were already here.  
He missed the moment, my mother said,  
but what else is new.*

*You're the one that was born near night,  
my father says.  
When I saw you, I said, She's the unlucky one  
come out looking just like her daddy.  
He laughs. Right off the bat, I told your mama,  
We're gonna call this one after me.*

My time of birth wasn't listed  
on the certificate, then got lost again  
amid other people's bad memory.

## no returns

When my mother comes home  
from the hospital with me,  
my older brother takes one look  
inside the pink blanket, says,  
*Take her back. We already have one of those.*

Already three years old and still doesn't understand  
how something so tiny and new  
can't be returned.

## how to listen #1

Somewhere in my brain  
each laugh, tear and lullaby  
becomes *memory*.

## uncle odell

Six months before my big sister is born,  
my uncle Odell is hit by a car  
while home in South Carolina  
on leave from the Navy.

When the phone rang in the Nelsonville house,  
maybe my mother was out hanging laundry  
on the line or down in the kitchen  
speaking softly with her mother-in-law, Grace, missing  
her own mama back home.

Maybe the car was packed and ready for the drive  
back to Columbus – the place my father  
called the Big City – now *their* home.  
But every Saturday morning, they drove  
the hour to Nelsonville and stayed  
till Sunday night.

Maybe right before the phone rang, tomorrow

was just another day.

But when the news of my uncle's dying

travelled from the place he fell in South Carolina,  
to the cold March morning in Ohio,  
my mother looked out into a grey day  
that would change her forever.

*Your brother*

my mother heard her own mother say  
and then there was only a roaring in the air around her  
a new pain where once there wasn't pain  
a hollowness where only minutes before  
she had been whole.



## good news

Months before the bone-cold  
Buckeye winter settles over Ohio,  
the last September light brings

my older sister,

named  
Odella Caroline after my uncle Odell  
and my aunt Caroline.

In South Carolina, the phone rings.

As my mother's mother moves toward it,  
she closes her eyes,  
then opens them to look out over her yard.  
As she reaches for it,  
she watches the way the light slips through  
the heavy pine needles, dapples everything  
with sweet September light . . .

Her hand on the phone now, she lifts it  
praying silently

for the good news  
the sweet chill of autumn  
is finally bringing her way.

## my mother and grace

It is the South that brings my mother  
and my father's mother, Grace,  
together.

Grace's family is from Greenville, too.  
So my mother  
is home to her, in a way her own kids  
can't understand.

*You know how those Woodsons are,* Grace says.  
*The Woodsons this and the North that*  
making Mama smile, remember  
that Grace, too, was someone else before. Remember  
that Grace, like my mother, wasn't always a Woodson.

They are *home* to each other, Grace  
to my mother is as familiar  
as the Greenville air.

Both know that southern way of talking  
without words, remember when  
the heat of summer  
could melt the mouth,  
so southerners stayed quiet

looked out over the land,  
nodded at what seemed like nothing  
but that silent nod said everything  
anyone needed to hear.

Here in Ohio, my mother and Grace  
aren't afraid  
of too much air between words, are happy  
just for another familiar body in the room.

But the few words in my mother's mouth  
become the *missing*  
after Odell dies - a different silence  
than either of them has ever known.

*I'm sorry about your brother, Grace says.*  
*Guess God needed him back and sent you a baby girl.*  
But both of them know  
the hole that is the missing isn't filled now.  
*Uhhh, my mother says.*  
*Bless the dead and the living, Grace says.*  
Then more silence  
both of them knowing  
there's nothing left to say.

## each winter

Each winter  
just as the first of the snow begins to fall,  
my mother goes home to South Carolina.

Sometimes,

my father goes with her but mostly,  
he doesn't.

So she gets on the bus alone.  
The first year with one,  
the second year with two,  
and finally with three children, Hope and Dell hugging  
each leg and me  
in her arms. Always  
there is a fight before she leaves.

Ohio

is where my father wants to be  
but to my mother  
Ohio will never be home,

no matter  
how many plants she brings  
indoors each winter, singing softly to them,  
the lilt of her words a breath  
of warm air moving over each leaf.  
In return, they hold on to their colour  
even as the snow begins to fall. A reminder  
of the deep green South. A promise  
of life

somewhere.

## journey

*You can keep your South, my father says.  
The way they treated us down there,  
I got your mama out as quick as I could.  
Brought her right up here to Ohio.*

*Told her there's never gonna be a Woodson  
that sits in the back of the bus.  
Never gonna be a Woodson that has to  
Yes sir and No sir white people.  
Never gonna be a Woodson made to look down  
at the ground.*

*All you kids are stronger than that, my father says.  
All you Woodson kids deserve to be  
as good as you already are.*

*Yes sirree, Bob, my father says.  
You can keep your South Carolina.*

greenville,  
south carolina, 1963

On the bus, my mother moves with us to the back.  
It is 1963  
in South Carolina.  
Too dangerous to sit closer to the front  
and dare the driver  
to make her move. Not with us. Not now.  
Me in her arms all of three months old. My sister  
and brother squeezed into the seat beside her. White  
shirt, tie, and my brother's head shaved clean.  
My sister's braids  
white ribboned.

*Sit up straight*, my mother says.  
She tells my brother to take his fingers  
out of his mouth.  
They do what is asked of them.  
Although they don't know why they have to.  
*This isn't Ohio*, my mother says,  
as though we understand.  
Her mouth a small lipsticked dash, her back



sharp as a line. DO NOT CROSS!

COLOURED TO THE BACK!

Step off the kerb if a white person comes toward you  
don't look them in the eye. Yes sir. No sir.

My apologies.

Her eyes straight ahead, my mother  
is miles away from here.

Then her mouth softens, her hand moves gently  
over my brother's warm head. He is three years old,  
his wide eyes open to the world, his too-big ears  
already listening. *We're as good as anybody,*  
my mother whispers.

*As good as anybody.*

# home

Soon . . .

We are near my other grandparents' house,  
    small red stone,  
immense yard surrounding it.  
Hall Street.  
A front porch swing thirsty for oil.  
A pot of azaleas blooming.  
A pine tree.  
Red dirt wafting up  
around my mother's newly polished shoes.

*Welcome home*, my grandparents say.  
    Their warm brown  
arms around us. A white handkerchief,  
    embroidered with blue  
to wipe away my mother's tears. And me,  
the new baby, set deep  
inside this love.

## the cousins

It's my mother's birthday and the music  
is turned up loud.

Her cousins all around her – the way it was  
before she left.

The same cousins she played with as a girl.  
*Remember the time, they ask,*

*When we stole Miz Carter's peach pie off her windowsill,  
got stuck in that ditch down below Todd's house,  
climbed that fence and snuck into Greenville pool,  
weren't scared about getting arrested either, shoot!  
nobody telling us where we can and can't swim!*

And she laughs, remembering it all.

On the radio, Sam Cooke is singing  
'Twistin' the Night Away'.

The cousins have come from as far away as Spartanburg  
the boys dressed in skinny-legged pants,  
the girls in flowy skirts that swirl out, when they spin

twisting the night away.  
Cousin Dorothy's fiancé, holding tight to her hand  
as they twist  
Cousin Sam dancing with Mama, ready to catch her  
if she falls, he says  
and my mother remembers being a little girl,  
looking down  
scared from a high-up tree  
and seeing her cousin there – waiting.

*I knew you weren't staying up North, the cousins say.  
You belong here with us.*  
My mother throws her head back,  
her newly pressed and curled hair gleaming  
her smile the same one she had  
before she left for Columbus.  
She's MaryAnn Irby again. Georgiana and Gunnar's  
youngest daughter.

She's home.

## night bus

My father arrives on a night bus, his hat in his hands.  
It is May now and the rain is coming down.

Later with the end of this rain  
will come the sweet smell of honeysuckle but for now,  
there is only the sky opening and my father's tears.  
*I'm sorry*, he whispers.

This fight is over for now.

Tomorrow, we will travel as a family  
back to Columbus, Ohio,  
Hope and Dell fighting for a place  
on my father's lap. Greenville  
with its separate ways growing small  
behind us.

For now, my parents stand hugging  
in the warm Carolina rain.

No past.

No future.

Just this perfect Now.

## after greenville #1

After the chicken is fried and wrapped in wax paper,  
tucked gently into cardboard shoe boxes  
and tied with string . . .

After the corn bread is cut into wedges, the peaches  
washed and dried . . .

After the sweet tea is poured into mason jars  
twisted tight  
and the deviled eggs are scooped back inside  
their egg-white beds  
slipped into porcelain bowls that are my mother's now,  
a gift  
her mother sends with her on the journey . . .

After the clothes are folded back into suitcases,  
the hair ribbons and shirts washed and ironed . . .

After my mother's lipstick is on and my father's  
scratchy beginnings of a beard are gone . . .

After our faces are coated  
with a thin layer of Vaseline gently wiped off again  
with a cool, wet cloth . . .

then it is time to say our good-byes,  
the small clutch of us children  
pressed against my grandmother's apron, her tears  
quickly blinked away . . .

After the night falls and it is safe  
for brown people to leave  
the South without getting stopped  
and sometimes beaten  
and always questioned:

*Are you one of those Freedom Riders?*  
*Are you one of those Civil Rights People?*  
*What gives you the right . . . ?*

We board the Greyhound bus, bound  
for Ohio.

## rivers

The Hocking River moves like a flowing arm away  
from the Ohio River  
runs through towns as though  
it's chasing its own freedom, the same way  
the Ohio runs north from Virginia until  
it's safely away  
from the South.

Each town the Hocking touches tells a story:  
Athens  
Coolville  
Lancaster  
Nelsonville,  
each  
waits for the Hocking water to wash through. Then

as though the river remembers where it belongs  
and what it belongs to,  
it circles back, joins up with  
the Ohio again  
as if to say,



*I'm sorry.*  
as if to say,  
*I went away from here*  
*but now*  
*I'm home again.*

## leaving columbus

When my parents fight for the final time,  
my older brother is four,  
my sister is nearly three,  
and I have just celebrated my first birthday  
  
without celebration.

There is only one photograph of them  
from their time together  
a wedding picture, torn from a local newspaper  
him in a suit and tie,  
her in a bride gown, beautiful  
although neither one  
is smiling.

Only one photograph.

Maybe the memory of Columbus was too much  
for my mother to save  
anymore.  
Maybe the memory of my mother  
was a painful stone inside my father's heart.

But what did it look like  
when she finally left him?

A woman nearly six feet tall, straight-backed  
and proud, heading down  
a cold Columbus street, two small children  
beside her and a still-crawling baby  
in her arms.

My father, whose reddish-brown skin  
would later remind me  
of the red dirt of the South  
and all that was rich about it, standing  
in the yard, one hand  
on the black metal railing, the other lifting  
into a weak wave good-bye.

As though we were simply guests  
leaving Sunday supper.