

Speak

by Tawnysha Greene

After we go to the doctor, Momma waits until Daddy comes home to tell him that my sister is deaf. We watch *The Little Mermaid* in the den while she and Daddy talk at the kitchen table, hunched over a hearing test marked with Xs and Os, lines connecting them low across the bottom of the page. *She can still be normal*, says Momma, knowing my sister can't hear, forgetting I can.

On Wednesdays while Daddy's at work, I go with my sister to classes in a big room with plastic orange and yellow playgrounds inside. Long smooth tables by the walls with little blue chairs. A poster by the front door, stars by all our names. Learn to follow the leader, write letters on a chalkboard, call each other friends—a word we make with our hands coming together, our forefingers interlocked. Daddy comes once, but when he sees our friends, he leaves, waits for us in the car, then when Momma drives us home, runs his hand through his hair the way he does when they talk about bills, saying, *disabled, retarded, stupid*.

Momma gets us books with stiff pages, pictures of hands above each word, lines around the fingers to show that they are moving. My sister's favorite is the one about animals and she signs the words each night before bed as Momma turns the pages for her. She screams at the spider page, hands over her face, then over one another, moving her fingers, making them crawl. At night, sometimes, she signs the words in her sleep, her fingers stirring, touching her face.

In the mornings, we play in our room, pull out a box with our dolls, Momma's fancy dresses, the ones she cut short, so that we can wear them. My sister finds a daddy long-leg hanging in the corner, crawling up the wall and she runs to the kitchen where Daddy's mopping the floor. She pulls at the mop, at his arms, signing the word for spider, pointing, signing again until he slaps her hands away, saying, *No, speak—speak from your mouth. Speak like I do.*

