

Salvage the Bones



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JESMYN WARD

Jesmyn Ward was born in Mississippi, a town right on the Gulf of Mexico. Ward was the first member of her family to attend college, earning a BA and an MA from Stanford University before going on to receive an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Michigan. Ward's first novel, *Where the Line Bleeds*, received critical acclaim, but it was Ward's second book, *Salvage The Bones*, which brought her to prominence in the literary community. The novel, a tale of Hurricane Katrina, received massive acclaim and received the prestigious National Book Award for Fiction in 2011. Ward, a former Stanford University Stegner Fellow, is an accomplished writer of fiction, memoir, poetry, and critical nonfiction, and was a 2017 recipient of the MacArthur "Genius" Grant.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Salvage the Bones is situated in the days leading up to—and the aftermath of—Hurricane Katrina, a destructive Category 5 hurricane that hit the Gulf Coast of the United States in August of 2005. Though catastrophic damage was seen from Florida to Texas, the city that saw the most devastating consequences and the most concentrated loss of life was New Orleans, Louisiana, where breaches in surge protection levees led to massive flooding that covered 80 percent of the city for weeks on end. The insufficient emergency response from the government at the federal, state, and local level highlighted the ways in which race, class, and employment status affected both preparation for and relief after the storm; an evacuation order was not issued until just hours before the storm made landfall, and many impoverished or otherwise struggling families had no choice but to stay and ride out the storm, leading to mass casualties not just in New Orleans but all along the coast of Louisiana and Mississippi. Relief organizations such as FEMA and the Red Cross were unprepared for the intensity of the storm, and these organizations found themselves overburdened and incapable of providing aid, relief, or rescue on the scale the storm demanded, certainly adding to the number of lives ultimately lost in the storm and the floods that followed: an estimated 1,836 lives were lost, making Katrina the deadliest storm in America since 1928.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* is one of the standout literary novels of Hurricane Katrina. Tom Piazza's *City of Refuge* is another notable Katrina novel, and follows two families—one

white and one black—as they confront the storm. Much of the literature that has emerged in the wake of the storm, however, has been nonfiction, such as Dave Eggers's *Zeitoun*, which focuses on Syrian-American business owner Abdulrahman Zeitoun, who chose to stay and ride out the storm in New Orleans to help his friends and neighbors, only to be arrested and accused of "terrorist activities" by the US National Guard. A good deal of children's literature about Hurricane Katrina has emerged as well—perhaps because the storm's powerful, devastating impact created in children questions so large and profound that stories were needed to explain the catastrophe. Julie T. Lamana's *Upside Down in the Middle of Nowhere* and Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Ninth Ward* both feature preteen female protagonists who find themselves swept up in Katrina's chaos and destruction.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Salvage the Bones*
- **When Written:** Early 2010s
- **When Published:** 2011
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Fiction
- **Setting:** Bois Sauvage, Mississippi
- **Climax:** Hurricane Katrina, which has been bearing down on the Gulf Coast for days, makes landfall and devastates Esch and her family's home and neighborhood, resulting in their dog China's disappearance and the death of her remaining puppies.
- **Antagonist:** Manny; nature
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Close to Home. Jesmyn Ward and her family in DeLisle, Mississippi were real-life victims of Hurricane Katrina. Ward was home when the storm made landfall; she and her family were not aware that the storm was a Category 5 until the night before it hit. Ward's family's house flooded, and as the water rose, they went together out into the storm to find shelter elsewhere. Eventually they were able to board a boat and seek shelter at a neighbor's.



PLOT SUMMARY

Fifteen-year-old Esch watches as her older brother Skeetah's prize fighting dog, **China**, gives birth to a litter of puppies. It is her first litter, and the labor is difficult and gory. Esch and

Skeetah's seven-year-old brother Junior is desperate to watch, and though they try to keep him away from the spectacle, their Daddy insists that Junior is old enough to see such things. Earlier that day, Daddy roused Esch and her siblings to warn them that a hurricane was on the way, and that preparations needed to begin—in the Mississippi Gulf town where Esch and her family live, hurricanes are serious business. As the puppies begin coming into the world, some live and some die; soon there are five puppies in all. At the end of the night Esch gets into bed and thinks about her crush, Manny, one of her brother's friends whom she occasionally sleeps with. Esch is obsessed with Greek mythology since reading a book about it in school, and thinks that the love between her and Manny is fated to be a love as great and terrible as that of Jason and Medea.

The next day, Skeetah builds a kennel for the puppies while Esch hunts for chicken eggs in the yard. Skeetah excitedly brings her into the shed out back to show her the puppies nursing. At the sight of China's swollen teats, Esch runs outside and vomits. Later in the afternoon, Big Henry (one of Skeetah and Esch's eldest brother Randall's friends) arrives to take them into town for dog food. At the grocery store, while Skeetah selects an expensive bag of food, Esch shoplifts a pregnancy test. On the drive back home, Big Henry drives past a bleeding man and unconscious woman who have just been in a serious car accident; he calls the police and waits with the couple until help arrives. Once home, a disoriented Esch locks herself in the bathroom with the test, and discovers that she is indeed pregnant—the baby, she knows, is Manny's.

The following morning, Esch wakes up feeling sick; she goes into the bathroom and throws up, then climbs back into bed and sleeps some more. When she wakes a second time, she reads from her mythology book for a while, studying the story of Jason and Medea; she identifies with Medea, who has had her heart stolen by a man against her will. Skeetah comes to the door, upset. He leads Esch out to the shed where he points out one of China's puppies, sick with parvo—a gastrointestinal virus which is highly contagious in dogs. Skeetah tries to get China to feed the sick puppy, but she barks viciously and pushes it away. Skeetah decides to separate the puppy from the rest of the litter and keep it comfortable until it dies. Skeetah and his friends are planning on hanging out in the woods later that night, and Esch spends the rest of the afternoon with him gathering supplies from the house and hunting squirrels in the woods. That night, Randall, Manny, Skeetah, Esch, and her brothers' friends Big Henry and Marquise hang out in the woods, eating squirrel sandwiches. Skeetah snaps the sick puppy's neck despite Randall and Esch's protestations, and then jumps into a swimming hole to wash the parvo germs off. Everyone else gets in the pond, too; Esch makes a move on Manny, but he rejects her. Esch wonders whether she'll ever be able to tell him about the baby.

The next day, Esch finds Skeetah in the other home on the Pit—an abandoned house which once belonged to their maternal grandparents. Their mother died in childbirth seven years ago, while giving birth to Junior, and now the house stands empty. Esch and her brothers only use it to scavenge supplies and hardware. Skeetah wants to use the linoleum from the old house to make a floor in the shed so that the other puppies don't get sick from the dirt—at six weeks, he will be able to sell them for two hundred dollars apiece, and he is desperate to keep them alive so he can get the money. Skeetah asks Esch to accompany him on an adventure—he wants to go over to a neighboring property owned by white people to steal some cow wormer from their barn. Manny, whose cousin Rico fights dogs, too, has told Skeetah that cow wormer will cure dogs of parvo and prevent them from getting other parasites. When Esch and Skeetah get to the edge of the woods, though, they realize that Randall, Big Henry, and Junior have followed them. Randall tries to dissuade Skeetah from breaking into the barn, but Skeetah offers to spend the money he gets from the puppies on sending Randall to basketball camp—Randall is touched by the offer, and agrees to keep watch. Skeetah manages to get into the barn, but while he's inside the owners of the house drive up in their truck—they have a dog in the back. Randall sounds the alarm, and as everyone begins fleeing through the woods, Esch struggles to keep up. Skeetah makes it out of the barn and runs with everyone else back home, but the dog pursues them. Back at home, Skeetah sics China on the white people's dog, and she wounds it badly. The wounded dog turns and runs home through the woods.

The next morning, Skeetah asks Esch why she ran so slowly the day before; she doesn't tell Skeetah the truth, and instead claims she was just tired. She helps Skeetah bandage the cuts he sustained climbing out the barn window, and then when he leaves the bathroom, she throws up into the sink. Esch examines her body in the mirror and sees that it is changing subtly; she decides to wear loose-fitting clothing and keep her secret a while longer. Out in the yard, Manny and Skeetah are talking about an upcoming dog fight. Skeetah wants to take China to the fight without actually fighting her just to make sure no one in the group forgets how powerful she is. Manny suggests that China is going to be weaker now that she's a mother, but Skeetah says she now has something to protect and will be stronger for it. Esch and Junior help Skeetah and Manny mix up the cow wormer for China and feed it to her.

The next morning, Esch awakens to the sound of her father smashing down the disused chicken coop in the yard. He wants to strip it for wood so that they can board up the windows of the house. Inside the shed, China is weak and tired; Skeetah worries that Manny purposefully gave him bad advice in order to weaken China. Later that afternoon, Esch, Junior, and Skeetah take China on a long walk to the park because Skeetah wants China to sweat out the medicine. At the park, Randall,

Manny, and some other boys are playing basketball. Manny's girlfriend, Shaliyah, watches the game, and Esch burns with sadness and jealousy. Back at home that evening, Daddy is still at work on the coop; he explains that the approaching storm has been given the name Katrina. Daddy enlists Randall and Junior's help in knocking down the coop using the tractor, but when some wire becomes caught in the grill, there is an accident. Daddy tries to remove the wire from the front of the tractor but gets his hand stuck, and when the tractor begins to slide down the slight incline towards the coop, Daddy wrenches his hand away and loses three fingers on his left hand. Simultaneously, inside the shed, an exhausted China attacks and kills one of her puppies after it gets too close to her food bowl.

The morning after Daddy's accident, Esch brings her father soup and helps him take his medicine. He is watching storm coverage on television; Katrina is heading northwest across Florida and shows no sign of stopping. Randall has a basketball game later that day, and everyone gets ready to go, leaving Daddy asleep in the house. At the game, when Esch goes into the bathroom to relieve her bladder, she finds Manny waiting for her. He tells her he's been thinking about her, and the two have sex. When Manny places his hands on Esch's stomach, he realizes she is pregnant; repulsed, he leaves her alone in the bathroom, weeping. Esch eventually musters the courage to head back out. She joins her family on the bleachers, where Manny's cousin Rico is harassing Skeetah about China's puppies. Rico wants one, but as the number of puppies is dwindling, Skeetah is reluctant to promise one to Rico. Rico, in a show of dominance, starts a fight with Skeetah; down on the court, Randall's coach ejects him from the game when he realizes Randall's family has caused a disturbance. Outside the gym, Skeetah's friend Marquise volunteers to settle the score between Rico and Skeetah by fighting his own dog, Boss, against Rico's dog, Kilo—if Kilo wins, Rico gets a puppy, but if Boss wins, he doesn't. Skeetah and Rico agree to the terms of the bet.

The next night, Esch and her brothers head through the woods to the clearing where the fight is to be held. Skeetah has washed China, and she gleams white and beautiful. A few other boys fight their dogs, and soon it is time for Rico's dog and Marquise's to face off. The fight is bloody and terrible; the dogs are too evenly matched. Rico wants to call a draw, but Skeetah, desperate to settle things, decides to fight China. Everyone begs him not to, but Skeetah is determined. As China and Kilo—the dog who sired her puppies—face off at last, China holds her own despite sustaining a terrible injury to one of her teats. When China rips out part of Kilo's throat, Rico calls for the fight to end; China is victorious.

The next morning, Daddy is sick; he has been drinking despite the warnings on his medication for his hand, and cannot do anything but lie in bed. Daddy instructs Randall and Esch on

what needs to be done to prepare for the storm, which is scheduled to make landfall in Louisiana very soon. Esch tries to enlist Junior's help, and finds him standing in Daddy's room; the two get into a fight during which Junior reveals he pulled Daddy's wedding ring off of one of Daddy's severed fingers sometime between the accident and today. Junior flings the ring at Esch and hides under the house until Randall pulls him out. Junior confesses that he wanted the ring because their mother, whom he never knew, gave it to their father. While Esch and Randall continue to prepare for the storm, Big Henry takes Skeetah to the store for supplies; Skeetah comes back with two huge bags of dog food and very few canned goods. He explains that almost nothing was left on the shelves, and suggests that if worse comes to worst, they can all eat China's dog food. As Randall and Esch sort through the food, they realize they don't have enough for five people. Daddy assures them that FEMA and Red Cross will provide food should things get really bad; otherwise, they'll have to make do with what they've got. The house is all boarded up, and Randall and Esch teach Junior how to hunt for eggs in the grass; after they gather up a bunch, they set them in a pot to boil. Manny arrives to talk to Randall, but before he leaves, Esch confronts him. She tells him that she is pregnant with his child; he calls her a slut, and accuses her of sleeping with every boy who comes to the Pit. Esch attacks him, but Manny throws her off, and leaves her weeping in the dirt. Esch laments that while Medea made her anger known, she herself has been unable to talk Manny into loving her or even acknowledging her. Randall approaches Esch and tells her they need to return to the white people's house to scavenge for supplies; when they arrive and break through the boarded-up windows, though, they realize the house is empty and bare. Back at the house, Daddy tells them the storm has been upgraded to a category five. Skeetah insists on bringing China and the puppies in for the storm; when Daddy forbids it, Skeetah threatens to sleep outside with the dogs during the hurricane, and then Daddy relents.

Esch and her brothers camp out in the living room the night before the storm; Esch, nervous for her baby's life, comforts herself by reading myths. In the morning, the sky remains dark, and Esch goes to check on Skeetah and China. China is barking at the ceiling; seconds later, there is a terrible noise. They go out into the hall and see that the ceiling in Daddy's room has caved in. Daddy, Skeetah, and the dogs move into the living room, and everyone settles in and listens to the wind. Soon, Randall realizes that the floor is wet. When Esch looks out the window, she sees water rushing towards the house. Soon the whole first floor is flooded, and everyone takes refuge in the attic. After a while, though, the attic begins to flood too, and Randall and Skeetah desperately make a hole in the ceiling so that everyone can escape. Skeetah suggests they climb an oak tree over to their grandparents' abandoned house. When Esch hesitates to jump off the roof and onto the tree, her father goads her on, but Skeetah reveals that Esch is pregnant. Esch

and Skeetah try to climb over to the house first and open a window, but Esch falls into the rushing water with the puppies; two wash away, and though she saves one by tucking it into her shirt, it dies. China swims off into the woods after the other two puppies, for once not heeding Skeetah's calls. Everyone makes it over to the other house, but Daddy is weakened, Junior is traumatized, and Skeetah, having lost China, is despondent.

Once the water level has gone down, Skeetah decides to go after China. As soon as it is waist-high, he climbs down out of the attic and wades off into the woods against his family's protestations. Once the water level goes down even more, it is dark, and Esch and the rest of her family set off barefoot down the road towards Big Henry's house for shelter. At Big Henry's, many friends and neighbors are gathered together; the house has suffered damage to the roof but is otherwise intact. Marquise takes his dog Lala to go look for Skeetah. He returns having found him, but admits he was unable to talk Skeetah into leaving the Pit. Daddy asks Esch if it's true that she's pregnant, and she says it is. He tells her that once things settle down, they'll go to a doctor to make sure everything's all right. Big Henry asks Esch, Randall, and Junior if they want to go for a drive through town and check out the damage; they are stunned by what they find. Houses, schools, and businesses have been reduced to rubble; trucks have been overturned and the homes and buildings closest to the beach have vanished seemingly into thin air. The group comes upon the remains of a liquor store, and sift through the rubble looking for alcohol for Daddy. Big Henry approaches Esch and confesses that he overheard her and Daddy's conversation back at the house; he asks who her baby's daddy is. Esch replies that her baby has no daddy, but Big Henry protests: speaking about himself, Randall, and Skeetah, he comforts Esch by telling her that her baby has "plenty daddies." Big Henry drives everyone back to the Pit, where Skeetah has cleared debris, gathered what he could find of China's things, and built a fire. Randall begs Skeetah to come back to Big Henry's, at least for the night, but Skeetah believes wholeheartedly that China is coming home, and vows to wait for her until she does. Esch, Randall, Big Henry, and Junior sit with Skeetah around the fire; Esch allows herself to imagine that China will return, and that when she does, she will look at Esch and recognize her as a fellow mother.

Medea. Esch is pregnant, and has been rejected and cast aside by the father of her unborn child—a local boy named Manny with whom Esch has been in love for a long time, despite the fact that he treats her badly and discounts her at every turn. As Esch wrestles with the knowledge that she is soon to be a mother, she considers the lack of positive female and maternal influences in her life and instead turns to three very different, very violent "mothers": her brother Skeetah's fighting dog China, Medea, and eventually Hurricane Katrina itself. As Esch and her family prepare for the oncoming storm, Esch struggles to gain Manny's recognition, help her brothers keep the vicious but beautiful China's puppies alive just a little bit longer, and raise her youngest brother Junior in the absence of her alcoholic father's attention. Esch is largely a passive protagonist—events swirl around her, and though she is present for all of the novel's major emotional and logistic beats, she is something of a wallflower, observing everything that happens to her and those around her but only rarely taking decisive action. As Esch's story takes on mythic proportions of its own, she is forced to confront the gulf between fantasy and reality and at last begin to take control over her own life.

Skeetah – Skeetah, the second-eldest of Esch's brothers, is in some ways the novel's second protagonist; he is the person Esch spends the most time with, and since the novel is told from her perspective, he is more keenly observed and characterized than even she is in many ways. Skeetah is a dreamer like Esch, but while Esch loses herself in fantasies of the ancient Greeks, Skeetah is a dedicated hustler. His prize fighting dog, **China**, has just given birth to a litter of puppies, and Skeetah is desperate to keep the surviving pups alive for six weeks so that he can sell them off and make some money for his family. Skeetah's intense emotional relationship with China forms much of the first half of the novel's tension and drama; he wants her to embrace her pups and nourish them, but her territorial and violent instincts—instilled in her by Skeetah himself—threaten her pups' lives, and soon only three remain. Skeetah, who puts his life on the line again and again as he raids neighbors' homes for supplies both for the dogs and for his siblings, is symbolic of the ways in which the Batistes—and families like them, stuck in rural poverty—have had to adapt and find other ways of surviving in a harsh, indifferent world. Skeetah believes that he can pull his family up out of their miserable circumstances if he pushes himself—and China—hard enough, and as the novel comes to an end, he finds himself still maintaining this belief in spite of the devastating losses Katrina has wrought.

Randall – Seventeen-year-old Randall is Esch, Skeetah, and Junior's older brother. He is quiet and focused and very tall; he is a skilled basketball player who moves "like a rabbit" on the court. He has dreams of pursuing the sport and maybe even making a career of it, but his family's extreme poverty prevents him from pursuing opportunities such as basketball camps and



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Esch – Esch is the novel's narrator and protagonist, a fifteen-year-old girl who is both physically and emotionally isolated from her family and the world around her. The only girl in a family of boys and men—whose friends are pretty much exclusively boys and men, too—Esch finds herself retreating into her imagination, fascinated by the Greek myths she's studying in school and especially obsessed with the story of

intensives. Randall is skeptical of Skeetah's dogfighting, and especially bristles when Skeetah puts **China** in harm's way when she's a new mother, demonstrating his protective nature as the eldest of his siblings and, arguably, the man of the house.

Junior – The youngest of the Batiste siblings at seven years old, Junior is desperate to be included in Esch, Skeetah, and Randall's games, plots, and schemes despite the large age gap between them. Junior's mother died giving birth to him, and perhaps because of this has had to shoulder a maturity and a painful wisdom beyond his years. Junior is too young to understand fully the gravity of his family's poverty, and his constant hunger serves as a painful reminder for Esch of the ways in which she and the rest of her family are failing to provide enough for Junior to thrive.

Daddy – Esch, Skeetah, Randall, and Junior's father is an alcoholic who is rarely home. He functions as a sort of Cassandra figure throughout the novel—Cassandra, a mythic figure from the story of the Trojan War, was blessed with clairvoyance but cursed with the condition that no one would ever heed her visions. Daddy is concerned from day one about the storm forming far out in the ocean, and tries to get his family to begin making preparations for it; the children are so disorganized and wrapped up in their own lives that they fail to start storm prep until the hurricane is near. Daddy loses the fingers of his left hand in a tractor accident while preparing for **Hurricane Katrina**; his disfigurement and the rigorous course of medication he has to start do not interfere with his heavy drinking. If anything, they intensify his need to escape the pain of his circumstances through alcohol, even as the storm of the century approaches.

Manny – A local boy who is a little bit older than Randall and Skeetah. Manny is the loudest of Randall and Skeetah's friends, and the most gregarious; Esch loves Manny from afar, but he does not return her affections. She is carrying his child, and when she reveals this fact to him, he states that he wants nothing to do with her. Esch, who has been pining for Manny for the duration of the novel, physically attacks him, alienating him even further but demonstrating her fierce unwillingness to be overlooked. Manny is smooth, suave, and unemotional, a self-absorbed and immature player.

Rico – Manny's cousin, a local boy and dogfighter whose dog Kilo sired **China**'s puppies. Because of this, Rico feels entitled to taking at least one puppy from the litter for free. When Skeetah doesn't want to give him one, the two get into a physical fight; Marquise suggests they settle the matter using their dogs rather than their fists, and both Rico and Skeetah agree. Rico is hotheaded, ferocious, and will do anything for a win, just like his dog Kilo.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Big Henry – One of Randall's close friends. A large, quiet boy

who is kinder to Esch than anyone else around, he has never tried to sleep with her—unlike the other local boys—and has always been something of a protector to her.

Marquise – A local boy who is Skeetah's best friend. Years ago, Esch lost her virginity to Marquise.

Shaliyah – A local girl who is dating Manny. Esch describes Shaliyah as beautiful but "crazy," territorial, and always on the hunt for a fight with other girls she thinks Manny is "messing with."

Jerome – Marquise's cousin. He fights his dog Boss (on **China**'s behalf) against Rico's dog Kilo for claim to one of China's puppies, and when the fight is a draw, Skeetah offers to fight China, despite being a new mother, to settle things.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



MOTHERHOOD AND VIOLENCE

At the heart of Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* are two very different but parallel stories of new motherhood: that of the central protagonist, Esch, and that of **China**, Esch's brother Skeetah's prize fighting dog. At the start of the novel, China is giving birth to her first litter; shortly thereafter, at the end of the second chapter, Esch reveals that watching China give birth has made her realize that "something's wrong": she, too, is pregnant, with the child of a local boy named Manny who will not return the feelings of love she has for him. As the novel progresses, Ward tracks China's violent first few days of motherhood and shows Esch adjusting to her changing body and struggling to keep the secret of her pregnancy. Running like an undercurrent through the novel is Esch's obsession with the ancient Greek myth of Medea, who famously killed her two children in order to wound her husband, Jason. Through Esch and China's twinned stories—and indeed through the invocation of Medea—Ward suggests that though one of the primary duties of motherhood is to protect one's offspring from the violence of the world, there is often a violence inherent in the act of mothering as well.

When it becomes clear relatively early on in the novel that Esch is going to have a baby, the fifteen-year-old girl—raised in rural poverty by her absent father after her mother died nine years ago in childbirth, friendless, surrounded by men and boys at every turn—finds herself without a model for how to be a mother. The only "mothers" she knows of are China and Medea, and as she considers the violence of Medea's story and the

vicious arrival—and, in a few cases, the quick dispatching—of China’s puppies, Esch finds herself beginning to conceive of her own pregnancy in increasingly violent terms, and to worry whether she herself will, in spite of this legacy, be able to mother her unborn child well. The scene in which China gives birth to her puppies is narrated in visceral, unflinching detail. As the puppies come forth, several are stillborn, demonstrating the cruelty and randomness of the act of giving birth; readers learn, too, that Esch’s own mother died giving birth to Junior, the youngest of Esch’s brothers. As China nurses her new puppies over the next several days, they fight against parvo, a viral gastrointestinal illness that kills one of the litter; China’s own violent instincts, which lead her to kill one of her own puppies when it wanders too close to her food bowl; and ultimately against nature, as Hurricane Katrina eventually washes away all of the remaining puppies and China, too.

The violent side of motherhood is put further on display when Skeetah decides to fight China against another dog, Kilo, just days after she has given birth. He argues that China will be stronger rather than weaker now that she is a mother. Though his friend Manny asserts that weakness in the wake of motherhood is the “price of being female,” Skeetah believes that motherhood is “when [dogs] come into they strength” because only then do they have “something to protect”—and that instinct gives them “power.” Esch overhears this conversation and wonders whether it will apply to her, too—whether she, who is often meek and silent, desperate for Manny to pay attention to her and uncertain of how to ask for help from her brothers, her father, or her neighbors, will soon come into her own “power.” China goes on to win the fight against Kilo, though one of her milk-swollen breasts is mangled and torn. This symbolic injury demonstrates Ward’s argument that motherly and violent traits are bound up inextricably within one another, and the equally grisly wounds Kilo sustains show that just because China has become a mother does not mean she has lost her capacity for violence—if anything, in accordance with Skeetah’s prediction, her new status as a mother has given her a new fierceness.

What constitutes motherly “power” in Esch’s eyes is complicated by her fascination with—and her idolatry of—Medea, one of the most notoriously violent figures in Greek myth; a woman who betrayed her family in order to marry her husband Jason, only for Jason to betray her by falling in love with another woman. In retaliation against Jason, Medea killed their two children before escaping in the chariot of the sun god Helios. Medea’s story is so striking because of how it seemingly goes against nature: mothers are not supposed to kill their children. However, as the narrative progresses and Esch watches China eat, maim, and neglect her own young, Esch is forced to confront the fact that her own memories of her sweet, kind, loving mother are perhaps outliers—perhaps motherhood is a darker transaction.

At the end of the novel, Esch and her family—and the unborn life inside of her—have survived Hurricane **Katrina**—a cataclysmic storm with a feminine name, which Esch describes as “the mother we will remember until the next mother with large merciless hands, committed to blood, comes.” Esch’s models for motherhood have mostly been models of violence, distance, and mythic fury; the storm has descended “merciless[ly]” like China, lingered for just a while with Esch and her family like her own mother, dead too soon, and returned to the sky just like Medea. As Esch and her brothers sit in the ruined, washed-out shell of their home waiting for China, who swam off into the woods when the rising water levels washed two of her puppies away, Skeetah has no doubt that China will come home, even as his brothers doubt him. Esch, too, looks forward to China’s triumphant return, and the moment in which China will look at her and recognize that she and Esch are the same; they are both mothers, and are bound together by the violent demands of their sacred but impossible roles.



NATURE AND CONTROL

The Batiste children—Randall, Skeetah, Esch, and Junior—are being raised in rural poverty, at the fringes of the remote Mississippi gulf town of Bois Sauvage. Nature is part of their lives in a ubiquitous and intimate way, and they are often required to live off the near-barren land around them in order to survive: grilling squirrels for meat, fighting dogs to make money, and finding what little joy and solace they can playing in the watering holes and forests of the Pit, the vast but sunken spit of land on which they live. As *Salvage the Bones* progresses towards its climax—the arrival of **Hurricane Katrina**, the real-life category-five storm which devastated the Gulf Coast in 2005—and as the Batiste family desperately struggles to outwit the storm, Jesmyn Ward employs heavy dramatic irony to suggest that it is nature that controls humanity, not the other way around.

The entirety of the novel tilts towards the inevitable: the arrival of Hurricane Katrina. The book’s chapters are divided up into days: twelve in all, which chart the approach and ultimately the arrival and aftermath (on days eleven and twelve) of the destructive storm. Ward plays upon her audience’s knowledge of the unspeakable devastation and irreparable damage Katrina brought—and the futility of all the Batiste’s attempts to prepare for the storm or control how it will affect them—in order to heighten dramatic tension as the novel unfolds. When rumors of Katrina start swirling on the radio, the only one who seems to listen to them is Esch’s Daddy. He urges his children to get to work preparing for the storm—rinsing out water jugs stored beneath the house, salvaging wood from the abandoned house that once belonged to Esch’s grandparents, and gathering foodstuffs and nonperishables. Most of the other characters, though, don’t believe the storm will really hit. Even though Daddy says he can feel the storm coming in his bones,

his children have other things to worry about (Esch has her pregnancy, Skeetah has China, Randall has basketball), and they all put off storm preparations until the very last minute.

By the time the storm arrives, the Batistes have boarded up their house, brought the dogs inside, filled jugs and bathtubs with water, and stockpiled what little food they were able to find at the local store, though by the time Skeetah arrives the shelves have mostly been cleared. Still, he insists the paltry bounty he brings back will suffice. It is only once the storm hits in earnest—and a tree crashes through the ceiling of Daddy's bedroom just as the water starts to rise—that Esch and her family realize just how puny and worthless their meager attempts at controlling how the storm will affect them have been. In the end, Esch and her family are forced to jump from their house and navigate rushing, rising waters as they make their way over to their deceased grandparents' house—built on a slight incline, its attic is the only place on the Pit not totally submerged. As they huddle for warmth and safety while the wind howls and the rain pours, reckoning with the losses the storm has already brought (China and her three remaining puppies have been swept away), the truth of their inability to exert control over the natural world around them sinks in. The Batistes are condemned to take what they can get from the volatile land they call home—poverty has robbed them of any agency or ability to change their station, and they can control the whims of the land around them no more than they can control their sorry standing in life.

There are other uncontrollable elements of nature at work throughout the novel, too: most notably in the scenes which feature dogfighting. A reviled practice which is—unfortunately—accessible, lucrative, and often the only recourse some impoverished populations have, dogfighting is portrayed in the pages of *Salvage the Bones* as many things: a necessary evil, an ecstatic celebration of power, and a way for the human characters in the novel to attempt to eke out some measure of control over a threatening natural world. On the eighth day before the storm, Skeetah brings China to a dogfight, intending just to watch with her from the sidelines and remind all the other dogfighters in the neighborhood that China, despite having given birth recently, is stronger than ever. China has been subjected to a purely natural process—bearing puppies—but Skeetah is determined to show off how in-control he is of his dog and, by proxy, his fortunes. When a fight between two other dogs—with one of China's puppies as the grand prize—ends in a tie, Skeetah decides to fight China after all; though she's a mother, the dog she'll be fighting is the father of her puppies, and according to Skeetah, China's new status should make no difference. As China and Kilo begin their fight, their owners—Skeetah and Rico—cheer them on as they draw blood from one another. Ward's narration of this scene is detailed, gory, and unforgiving; she is demonstrating the intense and brutal savagery that comes along with human

attempts to control nature. In this case, the owners are attempting to egg their dogs on, rewarding their most dangerous, terrible behaviors; though viciousness is in the nature of every dog, to attack one of its kind relentlessly and on command is decidedly against nature. Showing this, Ward allows for the fact that human attempts to control nature will end if not in disappointment then in ugliness, violence, and gross perversions of the natural order.

As Ward examines the ways in which her characters try to assert dominance over nature, she provides one major arena in which they fail and one in which they succeed—at a terrible cost. The violence of the storm is almost, in the end, a kind of retribution or reassertion of power; the characters who have attempted to shirk the natural order and impose control over nature find themselves completely at its mercy, with all they know leveled to the ground at last by one of its most awesome and fearsome displays of dominance in recent history.



MYTH

The protagonist of *Salvage the Bones*, Esch, is a daydreamer who deals with her taxing and bleak existence by losing herself in stories—lately, she's been preoccupied with the Greek myths she's studying in school, particularly interest the story of **Medea**, who famously murdered her own children. As Esch's story unfolds, it takes on a mythic quality itself; Esch's struggles with poverty, teen pregnancy, and an oncoming hurricane of epic proportions all lend a darkly fantastical quality to the trials and tribulations that befall Esch and her family. Through Esch's story—and the myths that inform it, such as the story of Medea and the biblical parable of Job—Ward suggests that the line between myth and reality is a thin one, and that even lives that seem unremarkable on the outside house battles, tests, and conflicts that are the very stuff of myth itself. In this way, then, even the most unassuming stories demand attention.

The myth most frequently referenced throughout *Salvage the Bones* is that of Medea, who slew her two children by her husband Jason as a way of getting revenge against him for his infidelity. The gravity of Medea's heartless deed is compounded by her lack of remorse in most retellings of her tale—her children were but tools to her, background figures in the story of her own existence. The violence and indifference of the figure of Medea is reflected most directly through China: a symbol of all the gore, pain, and suffering that motherhood stands to bring into the pregnant Esch's life very soon. China is a fighting dog but also Skeetah's beloved pet—her sweet disposition and beautiful appearance at home are sharply contrasted by her ruthless instinct for blood in the ring, and her apparent indifference to her puppies. Though the pups are sacred to Skeetah, who hopes to sell them to better his family's lives, they are nothing but meat to China for most of the novel—she viciously kills one puppy who gets too close to her

food bowl, and refuses to feed another. Esch observes the duality of China's sweetness and viciousness throughout the novel. After the storm hits and the Batistes are forced to leave their house, two of China's puppies are washed away. China jumps out of Skeetah's arms and swims after them into the forest, ignoring Skeetah's calls for her to come back. In this moment, Ward orchestrates a reversal of the Medea myth. Whereas Medea killed her children and was then borne away from their corpses on the chariot of her uncle, the sun-god Helios, China's children are taken from her, murdered by the elements, and China then willingly pursues their corpses by paddling along in a rush of cold floodwater. Ward introduces the myth, sets up a parallel, and then reverses it at the last moment. China's story—and by proxy Esch's and Skeetah's, too—takes on a mythical air, but Ward subverts her audience's expectations (which she herself has set up through the repeated invocation of the Medea myth) in order to show how life, free from the bounds of myth, can still read like myth.

The second myth informing the novel is never directly referenced, though it echoes everywhere through the trials Ward inflicts upon her characters. The biblical story of Job—a devout man who was subjected to a series of losses and humiliations in order to test his faith in God—is one of the most potent inspirations behind *Salvage the Bones*. As the novel progresses, Ward uses the Job myth to show how suffering of biblical proportions touches one modern American family. In the biblical story, Satan bets God that God's most devoted follower, Job—a man with a large family, lots of land and livestock, and a comfortable fortune—will curse and abandon God should he take away all of Job's happiness. God accepts the bet and begins dismantling Job's life. He kills Job's livestock, diminishes his wealth, and strikes Job with boils and disease. When Job finally dares to question why his fate has become so torturous, God appears to him in a whirlwind (evocative of Ward's use of Hurricane Katrina to level the already-long-suffering Batistes) and asks Job how he dare question the creator of the universe. Still, Job does not abandon God, and, seeing Job's piety and devotion, God restores everything Job has lost and doubles his fortunes, rewarding his most patient servant. Throughout the novel, the Batistes suffer a series of dark, harrowing, biblical slights. First, Skeetah struggles to keep China's ailing puppies alive—the ones she hasn't killed, eaten, or neglected are suffering from parvo, a gastrointestinal virus, and Skeetah must find a way to procure medicine for the valuable dogs upon which he has hinged his family's financial salvation. Esch discovers that she is pregnant by Manny, a boy who does not love her. Esch is forced to watch as Manny showers his new girl, Shaliyah, with affection while Esch secretly suffers from morning sickness and an uncontrollable bladder. As the storm bears down on Bois Sauvage, Daddy Batiste loses the fingers on his left hand trying to service their family's lone tractor; Junior, the youngest, suffers an insatiable hunger which his family's meager supply of eggs and ramen noodles cannot sate.

Just when it seems like no more suffering can rain down on the Batistes, the “whirlwind” comes in the form of Katrina, reminding them of the uncontrollable power of the natural world and the mythic proportions of their own seemingly ordinary, squalid lives. In using the myth of Job as an outline for the sufferings of her characters, Ward lends mythic gravity to the Batiste's situation—and the ravaged lives of all the families like them who must also face down the whirlwind.

Ward's novel is lyrical, dense, and suffused with references to mythical stories of suffering, pain, betrayal, and loss. In using myth to chart the outline of *Salvage the Bones*, Ward creates a story of her own which smacks of legend; indeed, as Katrina stories have proliferated through the years, and the horrors of the storm have been held up as pleas for attention to climate change and as emblems of the ways federal systems fail marginalized and minority populations in the wake of devastating loss, the story of Katrina has become a myth in and of itself—one which begs to be heeded.



POVERTY AND SURVIVAL

The story of *Salvage the Bones* is ultimately the story of one impoverished family's struggle for survival. While the approach of **Hurricane Katrina** galvanizes the Batistes against one very large and very real threat, even on ordinary days Esch, her Daddy, and her siblings are barely getting by, eager for new ways to reverse their fates and keep their clan together. From Skeetah's scheme to sell off China's puppies to the four siblings' organized raids on the houses of their nearby, better-off neighbors, the novel is full of the Batiste family's increasingly desperate search for ways to survive in the unforgiving social, economic, and physical landscape they call home. As the novel progresses and Ward strips more and more away from her characters, saddling them with larger and more pressing horrors and traumas, Ward ultimately suggests that poverty is a vicious cycle of Job-like proportions; one that the Batistes might be able to survive, but will never be able to escape.

Ward suffuses the novel with vivid, uncompromising visual descriptions of the poverty in which the Batistes live. She does so in order to create a stifling atmosphere and stress how devoid the Batistes' lives are of joy and ease; their whole world centers around surviving on the forgotten piece of land they have been left. Their house is situated on a spit of land called the Pit—a fifteen-acre plot inherited from their deceased mother's deceased parents. The Pit has largely been stripped of any beauty and resources it once had, the rich red clay sold off to wealthier white neighbors for cash. Though there were once fields and vegetable gardens all over the Pit, now it is barren and overgrown with weeds. The watering hole that Esch and her siblings swim in during the summer is “the color of a scab,” and their own house is so dilapidated and in need of repairs that they are forced to salvage the “bones” of their

grandparents' abandoned old house nearby for wood, nails, pipes, and other necessities. The Batistes, at the start of the novel, are in various stages of striving and denial about their impoverished situation. While Daddy drinks constantly, mutters about the impending storm, and delegates survival prep to his four children, the intrepid Skeetah—the second-youngest—is determined to turn things around for his family. His prize fighting dog China has just had a litter of puppies—out of the pups that are born only four survive, and Skeetah is desperate to keep them alive for just six weeks until they can be sold for 200 dollars each. The money would allow their family to eat something other than canned food and ramen noodles. It would also allow Randall, the eldest, to pursue his dreams of playing basketball, and the youngest, Junior, to know something other than constant hunger.

At the center of all of this is Esch, newly pregnant, to whom “survival” means something slightly different than it does to the rest of her family. Esch is responsible now not just for her own survival, but for the survival of her unborn child; she toys with the idea of trying to abort the child by throwing herself to the ground from a high place or mixing up a strange brew, hoping to have one less thing to worry about, but ultimately decides—more out of inaction than anything else—to remain pregnant. Esch's survival, then, becomes about protecting her secret for as long as she can—being discovered carries the nebulous threat of punishment, humiliation, and being seen as weak in the eyes of her all-male family. For Esch to be found out would mean for her to become a liability to her family; their whole world is about surviving, and another mouth to feed would stretch them beyond capacity. Furthermore, though it's not ever fully articulated, Esch's pregnancy represents an even darker threat to her own survival—her own mother died in childbirth shortly after Esch's younger brother Junior came into the world, and Esch carries with her the trauma of knowing that childbirth represents an even deeper endangerment of her own life, and of her family's ability to shoulder yet another emotional trauma.

In the end, the Batistes—having faced down a slew of harrowing physical, emotional, and financial trials culminating in the arrival of Hurricane Katrina, a vicious storm that washes away their pets, their belongings, and parts of their home—have survived. However, what their survival means is that they will have to find a way to carry on and continue attempting to pull themselves up out of the deep valley of poverty and neglect they've fallen into; their struggles are not yet over, and the hardest work they've ever done is yet to come as they face down rebuilding their lives despite their physically and emotionally weakened states. As Ward grimly foreshadows their inability to escape their circumstances, she makes a bleak prediction about the systemic vortex of poverty in America: for a disproportionate number of unlucky, marginalized families, survival—the bare minimum—is the only reward for all their

suffering.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



MEDEA, CHINA, AND HURRICANE KATRINA

Throughout the novel, there are three distinct but functionally similar symbols that reflect one of the novel's major themes: motherhood and violence. Skeetah's fighting dog China, the Greek mythological figure Medea, and the catastrophic Category 5 storm Hurricane Katrina all come to symbolize a violent kind of mothering that stands in sharp contrast against more traditional ideals of mothers as nurturers, providers, and instructors. The “mothers” in this novel maim when they should nurture, take when they should provide, and confuse when they should instruct, reflecting Esch's lack of maternal care and her own impending role as a mother to a child she does not necessarily want.

Esch, who is the only girl in a landscape populated almost entirely by males, finds herself frequently retreating into her imagination to escape her poverty-stricken circumstances and crushing loneliness. Esch is fascinated by the Greek myths she's studying in school—primarily the myth of Jason and Medea. Medea sold out her family and gave up everything to marry the heroic Jason, but when he betrayed her through infidelity, she murdered their two children in retaliation, absconding from the scene of the crime in a chariot driven by her uncle, the sun-god Helios. Medea's cruel, ruthless killing of her own children preoccupies Esch's thoughts, and contrasts the way in which Esch's own mother left the world: in childbirth, bringing her youngest child Junior—a surprise—into the world seven years ago. Esch has been raised largely without a mother, and as she considers the myth of Medea and this violent model of motherhood, she seeks to understand what being a mother will mean to her as she wrestles with the newfound knowledge that she is pregnant.

China, a fighting dog who is alternately sweet and vicious, gives birth to her first litter of puppies in the novel's opening pages. The birth itself is violent, and in the days that follow, China, a first-time mother, maims, devours, and deprives several of her puppies, revealing that motherhood is not always benevolent. China's animalistic, survivalist approach to raising her litter culminates in her losing them when the floodwaters of Katrina wash the last three puppies away. In a reversal of the myth of Medea, China's puppies are murdered by the storm and taken away from her, and she pursues them into the woods at her own peril, the opposite action of Medea's abandonment of her children's lifeless corpses in order to avoid punishment. As Esch

witnesses China's journey as a mother, she finds her notions of motherhood as a burden both confirmed and challenged; though a violent mother herself, China ultimately subverts the Medea myth, and thus shows Esch a way of looking at motherhood. At the novel's end, Esch is hopeful that China will come back, so that China will at last recognize Esch as a fellow mother; China, then, seems to be for Esch the paragon of motherhood, greater even than Medea or Katrina.

The third, final, and perhaps strangest "mother" in the novel is the storm Hurricane Katrina. A notoriously destructive hurricane that claimed the lives of nearly two thousand people and brought to light serious issues in local, state, and federal governments, crisis response and relief organizations, and in the very bones of contemporary American society, Katrina seems at first glance to oppose the idea of what constitutes a mother in every way. After Katrina hits, though, and devastates her family's home, land, and community, Esch finds herself thinking of Katrina as yet another "murderous mother." Esch says that Katrina "left us naked and bewildered as wrinkled newborn babies, as blind puppies [...] She left us to learn to crawl. She left us to salvage. Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother with large, merciless hands, committed to blood, comes." Katrina has devastated Bois Sauvage, but to Esch and her family, who have struggled with poverty and neglect all their lives, there is something familiar in the way Katrina has struck them. Motherhood, perhaps, is not benevolent or evil; perhaps motherhood, like the world more broadly, is indifferent, and in that way, a teacher. Though Katrina was "merciless" and "committed to blood," she has brought as much instruction as destruction, and has forced Esch and her family to start anew in many ways. Esch's confused concept of motherhood is further complicated by Katrina's swift destruction—but in a way, this complication opens Esch's eyes to the full range of what motherhood can do, and thus Katrina expands Esch's world even further even as she appears to shrink and weaken it.



QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Bloomsbury edition of *Salvage the Bones* published in 2011.

The First Day: Birth in a Bare-Bulb Place Quotes

☞ The puppy is pure white. She is her mother in miniature. But while her mother moans, she is silent. Skeetah bends over her. The other puppies are opening their jaws, twitching legs. We're all sweating so badly we look like we just ran into the shed from a hard, heavy summer rain. But Skeet is shaking his head, and I don't know if it's all sweat or if he's crying. He blinks. He scrapes his pointer over the pure white skull, down the puppy's chest and her belly. Her mouth opens and her belly inflates. She is her mother's daughter. She is a fighter. She breathes.

Related Characters: Esch (speaker), Skeetah

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 13



Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, China is nearly done birthing her first litter of puppies. She has delivered several puppies already, only one of which was stillborn. As an all-white puppy which is her "in miniature" arrives, it seems as if it is dead, and thus a bad omen. Skeetah, who is deeply invested in China's health—and the health of her puppies—for reasons both personal and financial, rubs the puppy until it comes to life, and as the little "fighter" takes its first breath, Ward forecasts the novel's focus on what it takes (and what it means) to survive in a world as harsh as the one the Batistes live in.

The Third Day: Sickness in the Dirt Quotes

☞ In [Mythology](#), I am still reading about Medea and the quest for the Golden Fleece. Here is someone that I recognize. When Medea falls in love with Jason, it grabs me by my throat. I can see her. Medea sneaks Jason things to help him: ointments to make him invincible, secrets in rocks. She has magic, could bend the natural to the unnatural. But even with all her power, Jason bends her like a young pine in a hard wind; he makes her double in two. I know her.

Related Characters: Esch (speaker), Manny

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis



Throughout the novel, Esch is working on her summer reading—Edith Hamilton’s *Mythology*, a collection of mostly Greek myths. When Esch arrives at the story of Jason and Medea, she finds herself enraptured by the story, and stunned by its parallels with her own life. Medea is, throughout the novel, a symbol of the violence required by motherhood and also womanhood more generally. Medea, a powerful and ruthless witch, found herself felled only once: when she fell in love with Jason. Esch, wrestling with her feelings for her brother’s friend Manny—who repeatedly solicits her for sex but does not return her affections towards him or even acknowledge her publicly—feels the same lovesick pain that Medea felt for Jason, and this makes her feel known and seen when nothing and no one else does.


The Fourth Day: Worth Stealing Quotes

☝ "You giving China a floor?" Daddy had started on our house once he and Mama got married. Hearing the stories about him and Papa Joseph when I was growing up, I always thought it was something a man did for a woman when they married: build her something to live in.

"No, Esch." Skeetah slices at the underside of the next tile with one of Daddy’s rusty box cutters. "I’m saving them puppies. China’s strong and old enough to where the parvo won’t kill her." He yanked. "They’re money."

Related Characters: Esch (speaker), Daddy, Skeetah

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is one of the first instances in the novel in which Esch finds herself not quite troubled, but certainly puzzled by the relationship between Skeetah and his prize fighting dog, China. Skeetah loves China deeply—but he also depends on her for social clout and monetary gain, and with the arrival of the puppies he seems to both want her to thrive as a mother and as a vessel for more puppies (and more money). At the same time, the love China has for Skeetah is similarly volatile and ungrounded—one moment she is sweet and loving, the next vicious and taciturn. As Esch observes Skeetah attempting to provide for China in the way lovers or husbands provide for their women, she

wonders what Skeetah’s true motivations for putting himself out for China are—a question that will continue to expand and grow more complex as the novel unfolds.

The Fifth Day: Salvage the Bones Quotes

☝ "You ran slow yesterday."

I hold the bandage close. Skeetah grabs a rusty safety pin from off the sink and pins it shut.

"Only in the beginning," I say.

"Why?"



"I don't know." The light is creeping into the bathroom like fog. Skeetah pulls his shirt back over his head, looks down at my body to my chest, my stomach, my feet. What does he know? I shift, barely help myself from folding my arms.

"Maybe you’re gaining weight."

"You’re saying I’m fat?" I am trying not to cry. I don’t want him to know, but I can’t tell him, because I can’t say it. I haven’t said it to myself yet, out loud. Just chased it around in my head since I saw the lines.

"No," Skeet says. "Just growing up, maybe."

Related Characters: Esch, Skeetah (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

Her whole life, Esch has been the only girl in a family—and community—made up of boys and men. The discovery of her pregnancy has left her feeling even further alienated from her brothers and their friends. Being the only girl was always tough, but this added complication threatens to render her a total pariah, and a weakling in the eyes of the tough, hyper-masculine boys all around her. When Skeetah seems to be catching onto Esch’s situation—despite all her best efforts to hide it—she grows frightened and even tearful, worried that her attempts at surviving in Bois Sauvage by keeping her pregnancy a secret are about to fail all at once.

“ I push with my hands, and it will not sink to dense pearls like fat. It pushes back, water flush and warm. I unpin my shirt. We all share clothes, so it's mostly men's T-shirts for me, loose jeans and cotton shorts. They cannot tell, but it is there. Perhaps Skeetah saw when I walked from the water and put on my clothes. I do not know, but I will not give him the chance to see again now. I will not let him see until none of us have any choices about what can be seen, what can be avoided, what is blind, and what will turn us to stone.

Related Characters: Esch (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

Directly after her confrontation with Skeetah, Esch vomits—both due to morning sickness and perhaps also to her nervousness—and then studies herself in the mirror. As she attempts to physically push her pregnancy away, she realizes that the secret of her new status as a soon-to-be mother threatens to tear her family and her own life apart. Esch references Greek myth as she predicts that the revelation of her pregnancy would turn her family “to stone”—paralyzing them, freezing them in time, and leaving them beholden to her just as Medusa’s famous powers did to her victims.

“ I ain't saying [she] weak." Manny still hasn't looked at me. "But you know China ain't as boss as she used to be."

"What?" Skeetah's tendons are showing.

"Any dog give birth like that is less strong after. Even if you don't think it. Take a lot out of an animal to nurse and nurture like that. Price of being female." Finally Manny glances at me. It slides over me like I'm glass.



Skeetah laughs. It sounds as if it's hacking its way out of him.


"You serious? That's when they come into they strength. They got something to protect." He glances at me, too, but I feel it even after he looks away. "That's power."

China is licking Skeetah's hand like she licks the puppies. Skeetah pushes her head away but she keeps at it, and he looks away from Manny. The tendons in his neck smooth. The menace leaves him; if he were a dog, his hair would flatten.

"To give life"—Skeetah bends down to China, feels her from neck to jaw, caresses her face like he would kiss her; she flashes her tongue—"is to know what's worth fighting for. And what's love." Skeetah rubs down her sides, feels her ribs.

Related Characters: Esch, Skeetah, Manny (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Manny and Skeetah discuss an upcoming dogfight. Skeetah wants to bring China along so the other dog fighters don't forget who she is and what she can do—but Manny suggests that China is already weakened in the eyes of the larger community by the simple fact of her status as a mother. His indictment of China as a weak female also seems to apply to Esch, though Manny won't look directly at her. As Skeetah argues that motherhood and the taxing physical efforts of laboring and nursing actually make females stronger, Esch feels herself longing to believe that the condition she has seen as a vulnerability and a liability for days could actually be a special kind of power inaccessible to men.

The Sixth Day: A Steady Hand Quotes

“ Daddy has only knocked down one of the chicken coop's walls. The chickens wander drunken and bewildered around his feet, seemingly mystified that he is dismantling their house, even though they haven't roosted in it in years. In the half-light from the bulb from the shed and Daddy's headlights, they look black. Daddy lets his hammer fall, and the chickens scatter, fluttering away like leaves in a wind.

"The storm, it has a name now. Like the worst, she's a woman. Katrina."

"There's another storm?" Randall asks.


"What you think I been talking about? I knew it was coming," Daddy says. *Like the worst*, I repeat. *A woman*. He shakes his head, frowns at the coop. "We going to try something."

"What?"

"I want you to get on my tractor and I'm going to direct you to this wall right here." Daddy points at the longer wall. "And we going to knock this damn thing over."

Related Characters: Esch, Randall, Daddy (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 124-125

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Skeetah, Esch, Randall, Junior, and Big Henry have just returned home from a day at the park. When they left, Daddy was working on dismantling the chicken coop so that he could use the wood to prepare for the oncoming hurricane. When they return home, he informs them that the storm has been named Katrina and is a woman like all the “worst” things. Daddy’s indictment of femaleness in this passage demonstrates the hostile environment that Esch, the only girl in a family of boys, has grown up in. Moreover, it is evident that Daddy has really been struggling with the chicken coop all day; but it seems that the revelation that the storm is a woman both makes him more determined to shut it out, and more confident that with the right tools, he will be able to control the damage the “female” storm inflicts upon him and his family. Little does he know that Katrina will be one of the worst storms in history, a force so powerful that no amount of preparation will be able to control its effects.

☞ "Do it," Skeetah commands China.

China's ears are fat as plastic knives laid on her head and her mouth is wet and pink as uncooked chicken, except here the bone shows. She is quivering, her muscles beset by a multitude of tics. She is shaking all over, now eye to eye with Skeetah, seemingly ignoring the dirt-red puppy rounding her bowl, waddling for milk. He is the one that is a model of the father, of Kilo; he is the fattest, the most well fed, the bully. Turgid with the promise of living. When their eyes eventually open, I think that his will be the first.


The tractor idles and the engine turns, sounds as if it going to move.

"Don't do it!" Daddy yells against his tugging, but his grunts eat the Don't, and I don't know what Randall hears, but he lets up on the brake and slips it in gear, and the tractor eases forward. "Stop!" Daddy yells. He is pulling back, his hand clenched in the wire, and he twists so hard his arm looks long and ropy.

The red puppy creeps forward, rounds China's bowl, noses her tit. China is rolling, rising. The rumble of the tractor is her growl. Her toes are pointed, her head raised. Skeetah falls back. The red puppy undulates toward her; a fat mite. China snaps forward, closes her jaw around the puppy's neck as she does when she carries him, but there is no gentleness in it. She is all white eyes. She is chewing. She is whipping him through the air like a tire eaten too short for Skeetah to grab.

Related Characters: Esch, Daddy, Skeetah (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 128-129

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Esch watches helplessly as two terrible situations unfold parallel to one another in the yard of the Pit. In the shed, China—exhausted from having been worked all day to help flush out the deworming medicine Skeetah gave her the day before—attacks one of her own puppies who has gotten too close to her food dish. At the same time, out in the yard, a miscommunication between Daddy and Randall leads to a horrible and devastating accident in which Daddy loses three of his fingers. In this scene, China, a female, is engaging in a more “masculine” behavior—a vicious, unmotherly attack on her own blood—while Daddy, who proudly declared that he would defeat the “woman” storm, Katrina, is robbed of the fingers of his left hand; the non-dominant hand, the hand bearing the wedding ring his wife gave him. This complex inversion of femininity and masculinity engages the novel’s major themes of motherhood, violence, control, and survival.

☞ The blood on Daddy’s shirt is the same color as the pulpy puppy in China's mouth. China flings it away from her. It thuds on the tin and slides. Randall comes running. Big Henry kneels with Daddy in the dirt, where what was Daddy's middle, ring, and pinkie finger on his left hand are sheared off clean as fallen tree trunks. The meat of his fingers is red and wet as China's lips.


Skeetah kneels in the dirt, feeling for the mutilated puppy; he knocks into metal drums and toolboxes and old chainsaws with his head and his shoulders.

"Why did you?" Skeetah wails.

"Why?" Daddy breathes to Randall and Big Henry standing over him, the blood sluicing down his forearm. They are gripping Daddy's wrist, trying to stop the bleeding. Skeetah is punching the metal he meets. China is bloody-mouthed and bright-eyed as Medea. If she could speak, this is what I would ask her: *Is this what motherhood is?*

Related Characters: Daddy, Skeetah, Esch (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 129-130

Explanation and Analysis

In the aftermath of the simultaneous accidents, both Daddy and China are drenched in blood, and no one can understand what has just happened or why. Skeetah is furious with China—and devastated himself—for her having taken the life of one of her own, and is nearly oblivious to the chaos taking place just outside. Esch, caught in the middle of it all—as physically isolated from everything happening as she is emotionally—sees the blood, gore, and horror all around her and wonders if this is what is in store for her as a mother. Between the myth of Medea, who kills her children as retribution against her husband, and the very real situation in which China has just killed her own pup, Esch wonders whether motherhood is a more vicious, vengeful state than she'd considered—as someone who grew up without a mother, she is confused as to what it means to be one, and is horrified by the idea that in bringing a child into the world she will be forced into a life of violence and terror.

The Seventh Day: Game Dogs and Game Men Quotes

☝ We have never done it like this. His hands are on my ass, and he tries to look down, to see, but it brings us face-to-face. Sweat gathers at his hairline, catches on the red grooves left by the clippers, like ant trails, across the top of his forehead. He grimaces, looking down, away, over my shoulder, up to the ceiling.

I grab his face.

Under my hands, his jaw, freshly shaved, feels like a cat's tongue. My fingers are black as bark against his paler skin.

He will look at me.

He shrugs, twists his head to the side. Flipping like a caught fish. I roll my hips. It is too sweet.

He will look at me.

He snorts, puts his head down into my shoulder. I pull hard, and my hands slide along his face. I grab again.

He will look at me.

He grunts, grabbing at my sweaty sides, his eyes closed. His lashes are longer than those of any girls I know. Beautiful. The thumbs of his long hands press into my stomach, so he can pull again, but then they stutter. He presses hard again: my belly pushes back. He looks down and back up, eye to eye: all I have ever wanted, here. He is looking. He is seeing me, and his hands are coming around to feel the honeydew curve, the swell that is more than swell, the fat that is not fat, the budding baby, and his eyes are so black they are all black, and they are a night without stars. All I have ever wanted. He knows.

Related Characters: Esch (speaker), Manny

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 145-146

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Manny has followed Esch into the bathroom during one of Randall's basketball games in order to have sex with her, despite the fact that his girlfriend Shalayah is in the bleachers watching the game. Esch, who has failed to get Manny to love or even acknowledge her for the entirety of the novel, decides to try both to get Manny to look right at her and see her for who she is and to make him understand the fact of her pregnancy. Esch is tired of being ignored—desperately in love, she uses a rather violent and demanding physicality in order to get what she wants. She sees herself in the myth of Medea—a spurned woman, desperately in love, with only a child as ammunition against her lover—and is determined to use whatever means


necessary in order to make herself seen and known and to avoid Medea's fate.

The Eighth Day: Make Them Know Quotes

☞ I try to read the entire mythology book, but I can't. I am stuck in the middle. When I put the book down and wipe my wet face and breathe in my morning breath, ripe to the afternoon under the sheet, this is where I have stopped. Medea kills her brother. In the beginning, she is known by her nephew, who tells the Argonauts about her, for having power, for helping her family, just like I tried to help Skeet on the day China first got sick from the Ivomec. But for Medea, love makes help turn wrong. The author says that there are a couple of different versions of how it happened. One says she lies to her brother and invites him onto the ship with the Argonauts as they were feeing, and that Jason ambushes him. That she watched her brother die, her own face on his being sliced open like a chicken: pink skin cut to bloody meat. The other version says that she kills her brother herself, that her brother runs away with her and the Argonauts, assuming that he is safe, and that she chops him into bits: liver, gizzard, breast and thigh, and throws each part overboard so that her father, who is chasing them, slows down to pick up each part of his son. I read it over and over again. It is like she is under the covers with me, both of us sweating to water.

Related Characters: Esch (speaker), Skeetah

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Esch—who knows that there is an important dog fight happening later tonight which will determine whether Skeetah gets to keep the remaining puppies or will have to sacrifice one or more to the demanding Rico, Manny's cousin, whose dog sired them—attempts to lose herself in Greek myth. The part of the Medea story she's gotten to, though, focuses on Medea's betrayal of her own brother. Esch can't help but see the parallels between the myth and her own life—knowing that Skeetah, his reputation, and his beloved dogs are in danger, threatened to be taken away by the family of the man she believes she loves. Esch is worried that she is going to have to choose, or face betraying her own brother in the way Medea did—Esch both fears and reveres Medea, and struggles with wanting

to be her and wanting to avoid becoming her.

☞ I listen for the boys and the dogs somewhere out in these woods, but all I can hear is the pine trees shushing each other, the oak bristling, the magnolia leaves hard and wide so that they sound like paper plates clattering when the wind hits them, this wind snapping before Katrina somewhere out there in the Gulf coming like the quiet voice of someone talking before they walk through the doorway of a room.


A cloud passes over the sun, and it is dark under the trees. It passes, and the gold melts through the leaves, falls on bark and floor: foil coins. Soon we reach a curtain of vines, which hang from the lowest branches to the needle-carpeted earth, and we crawl. Skeetah dusts China's breasts off, waves us on. We have been walking for a long time when I hear the first tiny bark.

"You tired?" Randall asks.

"No," I say. My stomach feels full of water, hurts with it, but I will not tell him that. I push aside a branch, let it go, but it still scratches my arm. Medea's journey took her to the water, which was the highway of the ancient world, where death was as close as the waves, the sun, the wind. Where death was as many as the fish waiting in the water, fanning fins, watching the surface, shading the bottom dark. China barks as if she is answering the dog.

Related Characters: Randall, Esch (speaker), Skeetah

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Esch and her brothers are walking to the dog fight in the woods behind the Pit. As Esch enters this dangerous and climactic situation, all three of her symbolic "mother" figures are "with" her—Katrina whistles through the winds, China is physically present, and Medea is on Esch's mind as she feels herself approaching the realm of death itself. Esch knows that even when there's a winner in a fight like this one, there is blood, horror, and often even death. She prepares to enter the clearing as if she is preparing to enter battle, and looks to her "mother" figures for strength, guidance, and courage as she does.

☝☝ Skeetah is squeezing China's neck, murmuring in her ear. This time I cannot hear what he says. Skeetah is whispering so closely to China's ear I only catch half of his lips behind the red-veined white of her ear. Her breast drips blood. China licks Skeetah's cheek.

Rico stands, already smiling.

"Maybe I don't want the white [puppy]," Rico says. "Maybe I want the colored one that got more Kilo in it." He laughs.

Skeetah stands, and China, stout and white, looks up at him. "She fights," Skeetah says.


Randall pulls the stick from his shoulders, swings it around to his front. "She's already fucked up enough," Randall says.

"Cuz, if she lost, she lost," Big Henry says, slowly, as if he is tasting the words.

"She didn't lose," Skeetah breathes.

Related Characters: Randall, Skeetah, Rico (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis



When the original fight between Rico's dog Kilo versus Marquise's dog Boss (standing in as a surrogate for China) proves too evenly-matched, Skeetah does the unthinkable—he sends China, a new mother whose teats are still swollen with her puppies' milk, into the ring. China is doing well in the fight, but Kilo—the father of her puppies—has pulled a dirty move by tearing at one of her breasts, leaving it mangled. This symbolic attack on her femaleness—and the attempt to point out that motherhood has made China weak—allows Rico to proclaim that he wants the male puppy, the puppy with less of China in it. Skeetah, determined to prove the others wrong—and save China and the puppies—refuses to believe that China is weaker just because she is a mother, and decides to send her into the ring for one final round.


The Ninth Day: Hurricane Eclipse Quotes

☝☝ "It's salty. Taste like pecans. And if worse comes to worst, we can eat like China." Skeetah rubs China from her shoulders to her neck, up along her razor jaw, and holds her face, which goes wrinkly with the skin smashed forward. It looks like he is pulling her to him for a kiss. She squints. I want to kick her. Randall shoulders his box, grabs the ramen box from me, and turns to walk into the house. Junior is tying his cord around an old lawn mower now, pulling at it like he's playing tug-of-war. The sun shines, blazes like fire, funnels down in the gaps between the trees, and lights up Skeetah and China so that they glow, each kneeling before the other, eyes together. Skeetah has already forgotten the conversation, and China never heard it.

"We ain't no dogs," Randall says. "And you ain't either."

Related Characters: Skeetah (speaker), Junior, Esch, Randall

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Skeetah has failed to procure enough food for his family at the grocery store while shopping for the storm, and yet has brought home an enormous quantity of expensive dog food for China and the puppies. His allegiance to his animals over his own family angers and baffles his siblings, and when he suggests they all eat the dog food if the storm necessitates it, it becomes clear that he sees China, the puppies, and himself as equals. He longs to be one of them, and longs for them to be like him. When Randall declares that such thoughts are essentially absurd, it throws into relief just how symbiotic the relationship between Skeetah and his dogs has become.

The Tenth Day: In the Endless Eye Quotes

☝☝ "I'm pregnant."

[Manny] stops in profile. His nose is like a knife.

"And?" His hair grows so fast it's already starting to curl. Sweat beads at his hairline.

"It's yours."

"What?"

"It's yours."

Manny shakes his head. The knife cuts. The sweat rolls down his scar, is flung out onto the rotten asphalt.

"I ain't got nothing here," he says. Manny blinks at me when he says it. Looks at me head-on, for the second time ever.

"Nothing."

Nothing. For some reason I see Skeetah when I blink, Skeetah kneeling next to China, always kneeling, always stroking and loving and knowing her. Skeetah's face when he stood across from Rico, when he told China, *Make them know*.

I am on him like China.

[...]

I am slapping him, over and over, my hands a furry, a black blur. His face is hot and stinging as boiling water.

"Hey! Hey!" Manny yells. He blocks what he can with his elbows and forearms, but still I snake through. I slap so hard my hands hurt.

"I love you!"



"Esch!" The skin on his throat is red, his scar white.


"I loved you!" I hit his Adam's apple with the V where my thumb and pointer

finger cross. He chokes.

"I loved you!" This is Medea wielding the knife. This is Medea cutting. I rake my fingernails across his face, leave pink scratches that turn red, fill with blood.

Related Characters: Manny, Esch (speaker), Skeetah

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 203-204

Explanation and Analysis



Here, Esch at last confronts Manny about the truth of her pregnancy. Manny has more or less known for days, since their encounter at the basketball game, but has in no way acknowledged the truth. Now, Esch violently attempts to ensure that he cannot turn away from it or ignore it, using


China and Medea—her violent mother figures—as inspiration for how to violently shake some sense into Manny. As Esch struggles against Manny, she wrestles with the realization that perhaps her love for Manny is already in the past—perhaps her anger and desire for violence against him has taken over, and there is no left, only the “knife” of her desperate, angry for acknowledgement.

The Eleventh Day: Katrina Quotes

☝☝ Mama had talked back to Elaine. Talked over the storm. Pulled us in in the midst of it, kept us safe. This secret that is no longer a secret in my body: Will I keep it safe? If I could speak to this storm, spell it harmless like Medea, would this baby, the size of my fingernail, my pinkie fingernail, maybe, hear? Would speaking make it remember me once it is born, make it know me? Would it look at me with Manny's face, with his golden skin, with my hair? Would it reach out with its fingers, pink, and grasp?

Related Characters: Esch (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ward explores themes of violent motherhood and the attempt to control nature through Esch's recollection of her own mother's attempt to “spell [a storm] harmless” through her words. The pregnant Esch now has something to protect—for the first time, she is afraid of a violent storm not because of what it could do to her but because of what it could do to her child. She wishes in this moment that she had Medea's magical powers (and the powers that she seems to believe, on some level, her own mother had). Esch is nervous about her role as a mother, and afraid that because she has no model for what motherhood looks like she will be insufficient. Her anxieties come to a head in this passage as she wrestles with her inability to control nature and her fears that motherhood is always accompanied by violence.

●● I kick, grasping at the air, but the hurricane slaps me, and I land in the water on my back, the puppies flying out of the bucket, their eyes open for the first time to slits and, I swear, judging me as they hit.

"Esch!" Randall yells, and Junior tightens his legs like a looping shoestring across Randall's waist. Randall grips Junior's shins, those legs thin as rulers. Randall can't jump in. "Swim!" he screams.

I kick my legs and palm water, but I can barely keep my head above it. It is a fanged pink open mouth, and it is swallowing me.


"Fuck!" Skeetah yells. He looks down at China, who is thrusting up and against his sling.

"Esch!" Junior screams, and the water is dragging me sideways, away from the window, out into the yard, toward the gullet of the Pit. I snatch at the puppy closest to me, the brindle, which is limp in my hand, and shove it down my shirt. The white and the black-and-white have disappeared.

"Fuck!" Skeetah screams. He grabs China's head, whispers something to her as she scrabbles against him. Her teeth show and she jerks backward away from him. She writhes. Her torso is out of the sling he has made. Skeetah grabs China by the head and pulls and her body comes out and she is scrambling. She flies clear of him, twists in the air to splash belly first in the water. She is already swimming, fighting.

Related Characters: Junior, Skeetah, Randall, Esch (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 234-235

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ward executes a reversal of the Medea myth. In the original story, Medea murdered her two children in order to enact vengeance upon her unfaithful husband Jason. Once he discovered the bloody bodies, she was borne away from the scene of the crime on a chariot pulled by dragons. In this passage—though China has been something of Medea parallel through her violent motherhood the whole novel—the myth is reversed. China's puppies are “murdered” by the storm, and it is she who chases after the two corpses, borne away by water.

The Twelfth Day: Alive Quotes

●● "Who the daddy?" Big Henry asks. There is no blazing fire to his eyes, no cold burning ice like Manny's. Only warmth, like the sun on the best fall days when the few leaves that will turn are starting and the air is clear and cloudless.



"It don't have a daddy," I say.

[...]

"You wrong," Big Henry says. He looks away when he says it, out to the gray Gulf. There is a car out there in the shallows of the water. The top gleams red. "This baby got a daddy Esch." He reaches out his big soft hand, soft as the bottom of his feet probably, and helps me stand. "This baby got plenty daddies."

I smile with a tightening of my cheek. My eyes feel wet. I swallow salt.

Related Characters: Big Henry, Esch (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 254-255


Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Big Henry asks Esch who her baby's daddy is; when she replies that it has none, Big Henry refutes her claim and insists that Esch's baby will have “plenty daddies.” Big Henry has always been warm and kind to Esch—and that warmth is rare in the hard-scrabble, hyper-masculine world Esch lives in. She is moved by his commitment to being present in her life and helping her navigate the realm of motherhood, as well as his reassurance that the men around her will do the same. Esch has had no model for motherhood and has been desperately searching for one throughout the novel; now, she realizes that she is the sacred mother figure she has been searching for the whole time, and that her community will both support her and look to her as this new phase of her life begins.

●● I will tie the glass and stone with string, hang the shards above my bed, so that they will flash in the dark and tell the story of Katrina, the mother that swept into the Gulf and slaughtered. Her chariot was a storm so great and black the Greeks would say it was harnessed to dragons. She was the murderous mother who cut us to the bone but left us alive, left us naked and bewildered as wrinkled newborn babies, as blind puppies, as sun-starved newly hatched baby snakes. She left us a dark Gulf and salt-burned land. She left us to learn to crawl. She left us to salvage. Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother with large, merciless hands, committed to blood, comes.

Related Characters: Esch (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 255



Explanation and Analysis


As Esch scavenges through the ruins of a liquor store and salvages pieces of colored glass, she decides that she wants to fashion the shards into a piece of art: a memento of what Katrina wrought. Though Katrina's destruction has been terrible and has taken much away not just from Esch and her family but also from their larger community, Esch chooses in this moment to see Katrina as a teacher—as a mother. She compares her to Medea, who famously alighted from the scene of a murder she'd committed in a chariot drawn by dragons. Though Medea and Katrina are both “murderous mother[s,]” Esch has learned a lot from both of them, and is now less fearful of the merciless teachers or “mothers” and violent incidents still to come throughout her life.

“She's going to come back to me,” he says. “Watch.”
[...]

China. She will return, standing tall and straight, the milk burned out of her. She will look down on the circle of light we have made in the Pit, and she will know that I have kept watch, that I have fought. China will bark and call me sister. In the star-suffocated sky, there is a great waiting silence. She will know that I am a mother.

Related Characters: Esch, Skeetah (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 258

Explanation and Analysis

In the novel's final lines, Skeetah refuses to leave the Pit for the safety of Big Henry's house—he is determined to wait for China to come back to him, and he has no doubts that she will. In this quotation Esch, too, seizes upon the fantasy that China has survived the storm and is making her way home to the Pit. Esch, the secret of her pregnancy now out in the open, longs to be recognized, at last, as a mother; she wants for China, a true survivor and a strong female figure as any Esch has encountered, to bless her in a way, and recognize her for what she is: a woman just as strong as the storm which ravaged her home, as the mythic figure who violently took revenge on those who would betray her.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE FIRST DAY: BIRTH IN A BARE-BULB PLACE

Esch's brother Skeetah's dog, **China**, is giving birth to her first litter of puppies. As Esch watches the dog struggle and labor, she is reminded of her own mother's final labor: the birth of her younger brother, Junior. Esch and all of her siblings were birthed in their house—a house built in a clearing in the woods called the Pit. Though Esch's older brothers Randall and Skeetah and even Esch herself came into the world quickly, Junior came out “purple and blue as a hydrangea” after hours of difficult labor. Esch's Daddy put her mother into his truck, against Mama's protestations, and none of the children ever saw her again; she died at the hospital.

Now, Esch observes that “what **China** is doing is fighting, like she was born to do.” Skeetah urges Esch, Randall, Junior, and their daddy to leave the shed and give China some space to breathe and relax, but they all want to stay and watch. Skeetah has been sleeping in the shed with China all week, waiting for the birth.

Esch tries to get Junior to turn away from the gory labor, but it is of no use; Junior wants to watch. He watched when **China** mated with the dog that impregnated her, too, and Esch observes now that he is watching China as if he's watching television. Daddy insists that Junior is old enough to stay and watch.

Esch sees **China** start to struggle, and suggests Skeetah help her push. Skeetah insists that China doesn't need any help; sure enough, seconds later, a “purplish red bulb” begins to “bloom” from China; the first puppy is arriving.

Earlier that day, Esch was awakened by her father knocking on the door of her and Junior's room, urging them to get up so they could start preparing for the next hurricane. It's summer, and during summer, there is always a hurricane coming or going to or from the family's Mississippi Gulf town, Bois Sauvage. Esch, still exhausted, fell back asleep, and woke up hours later to the sounds of Junior fishing jugs and bottles out from under the house at his father's instruction; Daddy wanted to start cleaning the vessels and filling them with water.

Right from the start, the novel establishes its primary concerns: motherhood, violence, the natural world, and the perils and demands of life in rural poverty. Esch and her family watch China's labor intensely in spite of the trauma they were exposed to watching their mother's most recent—and final—birth seven years ago.



It is clear that Skeetah is anxious about China's birth, and at least a little desperate to try and assert some control over the natural process of her labor despite his inherent inability to do so.



Though Junior is only seven, his life has been hard due to his family's difficult circumstances and he has seen things that children his age aren't ordinarily exposed to.



At a crucial moment, Skeetah chooses to allow nature to take its course rather than interfering with the delicate process of labor.



Esch and her family live lives that are deeply enmeshed in the natural world. China's birth establishes this fact from one angle—the willful acceptance of nature into their home—and the approach of a new hurricane establishes it from another, demonstrating the ways in which nature makes its ways into their lives unannounced and unwelcome.



Esch could hear the sounds of her brothers talking with their friends; she could recognize the voice of Manny, one of Randall's buddies, talking about how no more hurricanes were going to hit. Esch heard her Daddy insisting the opposite: that this year's storm season was the worst in his memory. As Esch pulled her hair back and dressed, preparing to join the boys outside, she thought of her reading for class: Edith Hamilton's [Mythology](#), and wondered if when **Medea** met her husband Jason for the first time she felt what Esch was feeling.

Now, blood oozes from **China** as she pushes the first puppy into the world. China writhes and bucks, and Esch thinks she looks like a churchgoer who has "caught the ghost." Skeetah catches the first puppy in a towel and notes that it is "orange, like [its] daddy;" Skeetah predicts that the puppy will be a "killer."

The second puppy comes just after the first; it is small and white with tiny black spots. Esch notes that the puppy looks like a "flat cartoon dog;" after looking at it for a moment, she realizes it is stillborn. Skeetah is briefly discouraged, but then realizes that a third puppy is coming right away. The puppy is a girl; she is white and brown and alive. **China** growls and yelps; the labor is not done.

Esch thinks back, again, to earlier that day. As she walked outside and greeted Manny, who was playing basketball with Randall in the yard, she felt hot and nervous. Before she could talk to Manny, Daddy urged her to rinse the jugs Junior was pulling out from underneath the house. As Esch rinsed the red earth from the jugs, more of Randall and Skeetah's friends arrived: Big Henry and Marquise. The Pit, Esch thinks, feels "empty" without her brothers' friends around.

Esch listened to the boys talk; they soon brought up Manny's girlfriend, Shaliyah. Esch was shaking water around in a jug to clean it, and it cracked in her hands. She began bleeding. Not wanting the boys—especially Manny—to see her and pity her, she hurried to rinse the cut underneath the faucet on the side of the house. Randall came up beside her and examined the cut; he told her to press on it until it stopped bleeding, advice their mother used to give them when, as children, they got cuts or scrapes playing in the Pit. Esch noticed Manny staring at them; as she did, he looked away.

This passage establishes the constant influence of male voices on Esch's existence. From the moment she wakes up most mornings, she is surrounded by male beings and male energy; to compensate, she has retreated largely into her imagination and into the myths she's studying in school, attempting to learn about what it is to be a woman from other sources.



There is an air of myth, too, to the process of China's labor. From the religious associations in Esch's head to Skeetah's role in helping bring the puppies into the world, China's first litter seems to be an auspicious brood.



Though Skeetah is excited as the puppies begin to come, there is a violence and a darkness to the joyous occasion, too; Skeetah and everyone else is reminded of this when the stillborn puppy comes.



Esch's fascination with Manny is interrupted by her father's demands. In their earlier conversation, Manny and Daddy were arguing about the storms, and this argument introduces their personalities: Daddy is desperate for control despite having none, whereas Manny's indifference to the threat of a catastrophic hurricane shows how desensitized he is to violence, to chance, and to things beyond his control.



This passage makes clear Esch's overwhelming and even violent desire for Manny. When she hears him talking about his girlfriend, she cracks a large, heavy jug—this shows the power of her devastation when she doesn't get what she wants where Manny is concerned, and it sets up a parallel between Esch and the mythical Medea (whose desire was also violent).



The fourth puppy is black-and-white and mews more loudly than his siblings. This puppy is Esch's favorite so far, and she wants to keep it for herself. She knows, though, that Skeetah will never let her, as the pup is worth too much money. **China** is a renowned fighting dog in Bois Sauvage, and her puppies will fetch a high price—especially considering the fact that the dog that sired them, Kilo, is equally fierce. The dog's owner, Rico, is Manny's cousin, and he makes his whole living dogfighting. The fifth puppy comes; it is pure white, China in miniature. The puppy is silent, and Esch worries that it is dead; Skeetah pets the puppy with one finger, though, and it soon comes to life. A "fighter" like her mother, the puppy takes her first breath.

Earlier, when Esch finished washing out all the jugs and placed them in the kitchen, she took a walk towards the woods at the edge of the Pit. The boys had finished their basketball game, and Junior had gone to the woods to hunt for armadillos. As Esch walked towards the forest, she thought about the history of her family's land. Her mother's parents, Mother Lizbeth and Papa Joseph, originally owned all fifteen acres of the Pit. Papa Joseph let neighboring white folks dig the land up for clay, and their excavation created a pond. Both of Esch's grandparents have passed, and now it is just her, her father, and her brothers left on the family's land. The Pit has become overgrown, and because Esch's father burns all their garbage on the property, it often smells like plastic and trash. The water in the pond often gets low and turns the color of a scab.

Walking up to the pond earlier, Esch stared down into it for a while, and when she turned to leave, she ran into Manny, who predicted that there would be rain soon, and they'd all be able to swim in the pond. Esch was too afraid to make a move on Manny, but he reached out and grabbed her ass, pulling her shorts down and peeling off her clothes. Esch has slept with many boys—when she's having sex, she feels like a Greek goddess; "beloved." Every time she sleeps with Manny, though, she feels different than she's felt with other boys. She feels she has given Manny her true heart, her "pulpy ripe heart."

Back in the shed, **China** is licking her puppies clean; Esch has never seen her so gentle. Daddy warns everyone that China's labor is not done—she still has to pass the afterbirth. Sure enough, as if she can hear him, China suddenly stands up and walks to a corner of the shed, where she squats and delivers the afterbirth. She turns around and eats it, then walks over to Skeetah and licks his pinkie.

This passage establishes the high stakes—and ubiquitous presence—dogfighting has in this community. A rural and poor area, there is little to make money off of; the fact that many central characters in the novel devote their lives and livelihoods to trying to control animals and pervert nature speaks to several of the novel's major themes. Strength and viciousness are revered in this community; the white puppy's "fighter" attitude pleases Skeetah even though she is just seconds old.



This passage shows the ways in which Esch and her family have had to allow others to ravage their land in order to survive, and demonstrates the mechanisms of race and class, which keep families like Esch's stuck in cycles of rural poverty, isolation, and the gradual fall into disrepair.



For Esch, sex is one of the rare times she gets to feel in touch with both her femininity and with feelings of power over herself and others. Esch craves attention and escape as a result of her chaotic and claustrophobic family life; during sex, she gets both the physical release of contact and the imaginative release of allowing herself to pretend she is one of the characters in the myths she loves.



This passage shows the maelstrom of violence and sweetness that surrounds China. One moment, she is a fearsome creature surrendering to ancient animalistic instincts; the next she is a sweet pet, showing affection to her owner.



Esch can see something moving in the corner—Skeetah goes over to inspect it, and sees that **China** has abandoned in the corner the runt of the litter. It is a brindle puppy, and though it is half the size of the others, it is alive. Skeetah predicts, though, that the runt will soon die.

China grows stiff and rigid, glowering past her puppies and Skeetah towards Esch, Randall, and Junior. Skeetah tells everyone to leave the shed so that he can tend to China and the puppies. Inside, Randall gives Junior a bath; when Junior is done, Esch takes a lukewarm shower. She crawls into bed, feeling nauseous and lightheaded. She imagines Manny hovering above her, and thinks that he must love her “like Jason” loved Medea.

THE SECOND DAY: HIDDEN EGGS

The morning after the birth, Esch is awakened by the sound of hammering in the yard. She goes outside to find Skeetah building a kennel for the puppies—though they’re too little for it now, he says, they’ll need it in six weeks. Skeetah asks Esch if she wants to see the puppies, and then leads her into the shed. The puppies are no longer slick and squirming; instead they look fluffy and downy, almost like chicks. They roll and tumble over one another as they move towards **China**. Skeetah remarks reverently how lucky he is to have five puppies; it being China’s first litter, he expected that all but one or two would die. Esch, too hungry to focus on the “miracle” of the puppies, asks Skeetah if he wants breakfast, but he insists on getting back to work on the kennel.

Esch wanders around the Pit looking for eggs. Her mother taught her how to find eggs when she was a girl. Now, whenever she goes looking for the eggs hidden by the twenty or thirty hens that roam the pit, Esch imagines her mother is just ahead of her. Though she enjoys hunting for eggs, it is still work; the only thing that has ever come to Esch easily is sex. She lost her virginity at twelve to Marquise, Skeetah’s closest friend. The act came naturally to her and felt simple as swimming, and every time she has slept with a different boy since has been easy and effortless.

China’s abandonment of the runt in the puddle of afterbirth foreshadows the indifference she will develop towards several of her offspring as the novel progresses—ruthless as Medea, her children seem to mean little to her.



After an intense night watching China give birth, Esch turns to her equally intense fantasies of mythic love. Though the story of Jason and Medea ends in violence and bloodshed, Esch’s actual life has enough of those things in it that even her escapist fantasies are tinged with darkness that reflects her reality.



This passage shows how entirely devoted Skeetah is to both China and her puppies. His commitment to keeping them all alive comes out of a combination of love and selfishness; Skeetah cares for the animals, to be sure, but also knows that China represents financial opportunity—and her puppies are valuable enough that selling them all could change Skeetah and his family’s lives.



Esch’s life involves a lot of physical exertion and often the need to scavenge, forage, or salvage to make her way. Sex is the one physical thing (other than swimming) that Esch doesn’t find laborious or humiliating—she has competing feelings about the different parts of the physical realm of her life.



Esch, having gathered up several chicken eggs, heads inside to make breakfast. Junior, though, complains he doesn't want to eat scrambled eggs again, and he insists on eating ramen noodles. Esch cooks up some eggs and brings them to Skeetah instead, and they head back into the shed to check on the puppies. Skeetah gives his eggs to **China**, and pulls one of the puppies away from where it is nursing to show it to Esch. At the sight of China's swollen nipples, Esch runs outside of the shed and throws up into the dirt. Skeetah follows her and rubs her back in the same soft, slow way he touches China.

Later, out in the yard, Daddy gets Big Henry—whose name is due to his size and the fact that he looks to be in his mid-twenties despite being just eighteen. Daddy gives him a beer out of the six-pack he's just bought and he jokes with Big Henry about women while Big Henry pretends to be interested and amused. Esch and Big Henry make eye contact, and she thinks about how kind he's always been to her, since she was a little girl. Lately she'd begun to assume that he'd one day come to her for sex, but he never has. Skeetah comes up to Esch, Big Henry, and Daddy and asks Esch and Big Henry if they'll come with him to town to get dog food, and the three of them pile into Big Henry's car.

At the grocery store in the next town over, the parking lot is full and the store is busy with people buying up supplies in preparation for the hurricane. Skeetah doesn't even look at any canned food or water jugs and instead goes straight for the dog food. He picks a giant bag of an expensive brand and then heads for the checkout. Waiting in line, Esch can feel a pregnancy test she's shoplifted inside the waistband of her shorts.

On the drive back home, Esch thinks about how watching **China** give birth made her realize that she herself could be pregnant. She has missed her period two months in a row and has a heavy feeling in her stomach—not to mention the fact that she's started vomiting every other day. Esch, lost in thought, looks out the window and sees a woman lying in the road.

As Skeetah gets closer to the woman, he sees that she has been in a car accident. There is a car in a ditch at the side of the road, and a man, bleeding from the head, pacing back and forth. Big Henry rolls down his window and asks if the two of them need help. The man reveals that he has a cell phone and has called 911, but has no idea where he is. He passes Skeetah the phone and asks him to tell the police their exact location. Skeetah is too stunned to take the phone, though, so Big Henry accepts the call and offers the police their location.

The revulsion Esch feels at the sight of China nursing her children is symbolic of Esch's complicated feelings—and latent traumas—where motherhood and mother figures are concerned. It also foreshadows a related trial that Esch herself will soon have to face.



All of the different male influences in Esch's life represent something different—and not all of them are positive. Big Henry, though, shows himself in this passage to be patient and kind; his decency surprises Esch all the time, as she is used to being seen as a commodity by the boys and men who surround her at every turn.



Skeetah again shows his intense commitment to keeping China and her puppies safe and healthy by purchasing a large quantity of expensive dog food when his own family is surviving on foraged eggs and ramen noodles. Esch tucks the pregnancy test in her waistband, the first concealment of many to come throughout the novel.



Esch's worries about her own possible pregnancy are, seemingly, given physical form when their group encounters a woman in distress. The woman's physical suffering mirrors Esch's mental and emotional suffering, giving shape to her fears.



The uncanny and frightening encounter with the accident-stricken couple rattles Big Henry, Skeetah, and Esch, too. The kind of violence they see in their day-to-day lives is natural violence or violence done for the sake of survival; the violence of a potentially fatal accident, however, is something new, and it stuns them all.



When he passes the phone back to the man, Big Henry tells Skeetah and Esch that the police have asked them to stay until help arrives. Skeetah is anxious to get home, though, and tend to **China** and the puppies. Big Henry gets out of the car to go help the man and the woman, and as Esch observes the man holding his hands in his head and looking down at the body of his wife, she thinks of Greek myth. In stories of ancient Greek lovers “there is never a meeting in the middle.”

Esch asks Skeetah if he thinks the accident victims are family members or friends, and Skeetah replies that he thinks they must be lovers. The answer surprises Esch; she wonders what Skeetah knows about lovers. Suddenly, the man from the accident approaches the car and tells Skeetah he looks familiar. Skeetah insists he doesn't know the man, and calls Big Henry over to get him away from the car. Big Henry calms the man and walks him back over to where the woman's body lies, but the man won't even look at it. Twenty minutes later, an ambulance arrives; the woman has not moved once the whole time.

Big Henry drops Esch and Skeetah back at the Pit. As Esch gets out of the car, she notices that Big Henry has the man from the accident's blood on his hands, and urges him to get out of the car and wash his hands under the spigot on the side of the house. Esch, meanwhile, heads inside and takes the pregnancy test; it is positive. She is pregnant. She sits in the tub and presses her eyes into her knees as the “terrible truth of what [she is now]” washes over her.

THE THIRD DAY: SICKNESS IN THE DIRT

Esch wakes up at seven after a sleepless night spent obsessing over the fact of her pregnancy. The moment she opens her eyes, she is sick, and runs to the bathroom and runs the water so that no one will hear her throw up. She lies down on the bathroom floor until she feels like she is about to fall asleep again. Junior and Randall call for her, after a while, to which she shouts that she is busy shaving her legs. She drinks some water from the faucet to soothe her stomach, willing herself not to vomit as she opens the door and walks past Randall towards her bedroom, where she gets into the bed and falls back asleep.

Esch wakes up again hours later, surprised that Daddy hasn't woken her up yet to help with hurricane prep. Wanting to stay in bed a little longer, Esch reaches for her copy of Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, and continues reading the story of **Medea** and Jason. Though Medea, a witch, is in possession of great powers, Jason “bends her like a young pine in a hard wind.” In this way, Esch identifies with Medea: they have both been enraptured by men against their better judgement.

As everyone adjusts to the initial shock of the situation, the fear wears off; soon, Skeetah is eager to get back to China, and Esch retreats again into her fantasy world as Ward demonstrates how Esch and her family and friends have been conditioned, through their tough circumstances, to absorb new kinds of violence all the time.



The scene at the accident grows more and more disorienting as the boundaries between the accident victims and Esch, Skeetah, and Big Henry start to blur. The longer they wait for the police to arrive, the more they're forced to wonder about these people's lives; and, seemingly, the reverse is also true.



Esch learns about her pregnancy just after a moment of terrible, traumatizing violence has occurred on the peripheries of her life. Motherhood and violence, entwined intimately since the first page of the novel, continue to be twinned entities as Esch's story progresses.



Esch's pregnancy quickly rears its head, wracking her body with violent morning sickness that reflects physically the entwined relationship between motherhood and violence on display throughout the novel.



Esch, feeling sick and frightened, retreats into the world of myth. Though the myths seem to bring her comfort, it is strange to consider how dark and violent they are; perhaps, though, this is why the conflicted, traumatized, put-upon Esch connects so deeply to the anger, violence, and desperation of the Greeks.



After a while, Esch notices Skeetah standing at the door, looking as if he is about to cry. Esch asks him what's wrong, but he doesn't answer; he just walks out of the house towards **China's** shed. Esch follows him. In the shed, the puppies are squirming and rolling as they nurse at China's breast; all but one are suckling. The brown-and-white puppy is sick, and Skeetah thinks that it has parvo, a gastrointestinal virus. Skeetah worries that the disease is in the dirt of the shed, and that the rest of the puppies will get infected.

Skeetah picks the puppy up and places him at China's breast, but she lowers her head and growls. Skeetah urges **China** to feed the puppy, but she only barks and lashes; her teeth graze the puppy. Skeetah pulls it away from her, calling China a "bitch." Once the puppy is out of the way, China relaxes, and Esch thinks she looks like a "weary goddess" as she nurses her litter.

Esch speculates that **China** is simply trying to protect the rest of the litter. Skeetah, with the puppy in the front of his t-shirt, agrees that she must be. He decides to separate the puppy from the rest of the dogs and keep it comfortable until it dies. Esch's stomach flutters with the realization that she will have to watch her brother kill one of "his own."

Inside, Esch struggles to eat some breakfast while Skeetah raids the cabinets for food so that he and his friends can have a get-together in the woods later that night. He wants to take one of the large jugs from under the porch for water, but Esch worries that their father will notice it's missing. Skeetah says he'll get Randall to lie for them and invites Esch along on the adventure, oblivious to the fact that she is miserable because of the baby growing inside of her.

Esch and Skeetah head back out to the shed, walking past Junior in the yard. Junior is piling wood planks on Daddy's orders, but he stops when he sees them coming and follows them inside. As Skeetah pulls a bucket down from a high shelf and places the sick puppy inside, he orders Junior to leave. Junior listens, but as he goes calls that he is going to find Randall and tell him that Skeetah is doing "something bad" to the puppies.

Skeetah's distress at the puppy's sickness is symbolic of his deeper fear of losing the puppies—and the income they stand to bring in. The idea of a blight or plague coming for one of the puppies is a darkly mythic idea, a fact which Esch surely absorbs as she surveys the tense situation in the shed.



China's refusal to feed the pup signifies a deep-seated natural instinct to protect herself—and the rest of her brood—from the threat of a puppy weakened by disease. The alternating ways Esch and Skeetah see China—as a "goddess" and a "bitch," respectively—reflect their competing ideals of what motherhood does to a female.



Survival is a dirty business out on the Pit—the uncomfortable realization that for Skeetah's pack to survive, one of them must die does not affect him tremendously, as he's used to dealing with painful choices and realities such as this.



Despite Esch's condition, she's still expected to participate in the demanding—and very male—world around her, helping Skeetah sneak around with his friends while ignoring her own discomfort.



Junior is a very curious observer of his older siblings' actions—but as the youngest, he's also deeply sensitive, suspicious, and desperate for attention.



Skeetah puts the bucket—with the puppy inside—back up on a shelf where **China** can't reach it. She growls, seemingly knowing what's going on, but Skeetah tells her to "shut up." Skeetah goes off to wash his hands while Esch sits on the steps of the house. Randall approaches with Junior in tow, and asks what Skeetah is doing to the puppies. Skeetah approaches with the bucket and a BB gun, and Randall tells Junior to go away. Junior listens to Randall and runs off. Randall tells Skeetah to spare the puppy's life, suggesting he can cure it with medicine. Skeetah insists, though, that puppies never recover from parvo, and begins walking off towards the woods. Esch follows him. Skeetah calls for Randall to join them, but he won't; he stays behind.

Out in the woods, Skeetah cocks the BB gun; he is going to hunt squirrels. In just two shots, he fells a large squirrel, and as he picks it up blood spurts out of its chest. As Skeetah begins cleaning the squirrel, he asks Esch about her attraction to Manny, but Esch will not answer him. They make their way towards a makeshift barbecue pit, and Esch watches as Skeetah cleans and guts the squirrel. Overwhelmed by the smell, Esch runs off into the bushes to throw up.

By the time the squirrel meat is done cooking, Marquise and Big Henry have arrived. Skeetah makes sandwiches of the meat with bread and hot sauce, and Esch reluctantly eats hers. She is not hungry, but her stomach feels better when there is food in it. She is afraid that if she throws up again she'll draw attention to herself, and wills herself to keep the food down in front of the boys.

Esch asks Skeetah if the puppy has a name; he admits that it doesn't, but offers Esch the chance to name the puppy. Though Esch doesn't see the logic in naming the puppy just before it dies, she decides to call it Nella.

Randall and Manny arrive, and Randall tells everyone that Manny's cousin Rico lost his last dog to parvo. Manny tells Skeetah he should kill the puppy quickly—every second he doesn't, he's just torturing it. Manny asks if Skeetah's planning on shooting the puppy with his BB gun, but Skeetah says he has something else in mind—he is going to break its neck, the way his mother used to break the necks of chickens when their family needed to eat.

Skeetah is in a difficult position with the discovery of a sick puppy, and this passage shows him trying to navigate the cruel reality of what he must do with his siblings' desperate, judgmental bids to save the puppy's life (though possibly to the detriment of the rest of the litter). Skeetah's practicality is ruthless, but he is doing what he needs to do to survive.



Skeetah knows something is up with his sister, but his attempt to ask her about what's going backfires. Though Esch tries to deny that there's something happening with her, her body betrays her—she cannot control the natural reflexes her "condition" creates within her.



Esch does not want to expose her condition to the boys around her—to do so would be admit to her femaleness in a way she never has before, having always been the only girl on the Pit. She is trying to control her body—and the violence it is doing to her lately.



This passage shows the reluctant but present tenderness both Esch and Skeetah feel for the puppy—they have been conditioned to look at things practically and in terms of survival, but here they surrender to emotion.



The boys have conflicting, competing ideas about violence and mercy. So much of their lives is calibrated by violence—the violence of poverty, the violence of dogfighting, the violence of male-dominated spaces—and yet when it comes to a violence this intimate, even these tough boys are squeamish.



Skeetah lifts the puppy out of the bucket. Esch reaches out to touch it, but Skeetah tells her not to, to avoid the parvo germs. He takes the whimpering puppy out past the tree line, and Esch can just barely make him out as he breaks the puppy's neck in the moonlight.

Skeetah comes back a while later, having buried the puppy, and begins stripping and throwing his clothes into the fire—they are all, he says, contaminated. He takes a bottle of dish soap he's stolen from the house and wades into the dirty pond nearby to wash himself; all the boys join him, and soon Esch wades in, too, fully clothed. Marquise, Manny, and Big Henry get in as well.

Manny asks Esch why she is in the water in all her clothes; beneath the water, he grabs her hand and places it on his penis. Esch wonders why Manny will never kiss her during sex. She uses her other hand to try to touch Manny's chest above the water, but he pulls away from her, asking if she's "crazy." He tells her things between them "ain't like that," and Esch feels her heart break a little. Manny swims away from Esch, and Esch wonders what will happen when she finally tells him her "secret." She knows that he is dating another girl named Shaliyah—but she has loved him for a long time. She wonders if the way she feels about Manny is the way **Medea** felt about Jason. Esch thinks of the baby growing inside her as a group of bats flies swiftly overhead.

THE FOURTH DAY: WORTH STEALING

Esch walks across the Pit towards Mother Lizbeth and Papa Joseph's abandoned house, swatting away fleas that bite at her legs. She and her brothers and her Daddy often "pick at the house like mostly eaten leftovers," taking from the shell of the house things they need for their own. Esch finds Skeetah in the kitchen pulling up linoleum—he wants to put it down in the shed to keep the puppies out of the dirt, as he believes that's where the parvo comes from. He doesn't want any more puppies to die—"they're money," he says.

Skeetah asks Esch if she wants to come with him into the woods today—he needs her help with something, but she has to be able to run if she wants to join him. Esch agrees to go. Esch realizes that since the puppies have been born, she's been spending much more time with Skeetah. Where he was once mostly an enigma who spent his free time playing with **China** or practicing hiding razor blades in his mouth, the two are now almost constant companions.

Skeetah uses a method of violence taught to him by his late mother to end the puppy's life.



Skeetah's desire to wash himself—like so many of Skeetah's actions—functions on both a practical and symbolic level. He wants to get rid of the germs, but also "wash away" the trauma and "dirtiness" of having killed the puppy.



Manny is okay coming onto Esch and taking advantage of her when no one else can see. The idea of the intimacy that exists between them being glimpsed by anyone else, though, is repulsive to Manny, even though it is what Esch wants more than anything else in the world. Esch knows that Manny is the father of her child, and sees their lives as intertwined by violence—just like Jason and Medea.



The novel's title refers to the process by which Esch and her family "salvage the bones" of their ancestors' house, picking off what's left of the past to assemble a ramshackle future.



Esch and Skeetah have been shown to have a close relationship for the entirety of the novel thus far, but this passage implies that this closeness is a recent development, brought on by the great change China has brought into both their lives.



Esch and Skeetah are startled by the sound of their father's tractor approaching. As Daddy walks into the house, Esch wonders if **Medea** felt about her father—from whom she fled—the way Esch feels about her own. Daddy tells Esch and Skeetah he needs their help with something. Skeetah insists he needs to get back to China, but Daddy tells them that there's a new storm in the gulf and they need to pull down plywood from the attic so they can board up the windows of their house.

Esch gives Skeetah a boost up into the attic; Daddy tosses him a hammer, and Skeetah starts pulling boards up and dropping them down without looking. He hits Daddy twice, and though he says he's sorry as he peers down from the attic, Esch can see that he's smiling; she smiles, too.

Later, Esch and Skeetah make their way about a mile through the woods to the east of the pit towards a piece of property where white people live. There is a pasture full of cows, a big barn, and a stately farmhouse; Esch and Skeetah have changed into brown and green clothes so that they blend in with the forest as they make their way towards the white people's land. As they hurry through the woods, Esch thinks again of **Medea**, who fled her father's home alongside her brother, to join the Argonauts.

When Skeetah and Esch arrive at the edge of the woods, Skeetah tells Esch to keep watch while he breaks into the barn to steal cow wormer; Rico told him once that it was okay to give dogs cow wormer in order to knock out worms and infections. Skeetah tells Esch to whistle if she sees anyone coming—he warns her that if they're about to get caught, she should run towards home without looking back.

Skeetah places a razor blade in his mouth and he and Esch begin crawling through brambles and underbrush as they make their way around to the other side of the property, closer to the barn. Once the wooden barn is in sight, Esch is struck by how much the wood looks like the wood of Papa Joseph and Mother Lizbeth's house. Skeetah points across the clearing to the group of trees where they first spotted the property; someone is there.

Esch can't stop seeing parallels between the Medea myth and her own life. She, too, has been captivated by a man who doesn't love her; she, too, longs to escape her overbearing and dangerous father.



Esch and Skeetah are even further united in this passage over their shared dislike of their father, and their shared desire to get away from him as soon as possible.



As Esch and Skeetah head off on an adventure together, Esch is again—or still—reminded of her favorite myth. Picturing herself as Medea allows her to entertain the illusion that she has control over her circumstances and that she is powerful,



Throughout the novel, Esch is often positioned—and often even positions herself—as a passive observer. This passage shows her engaging in a role which requires of her nothing but observation, the purest form of one of her oft-chosen escapes from the responsibilities of her difficult life.



The wood on the barn matching the wood on the abandoned house on the Pit shows how very different Esch and her family's lives are from their more privileged neighbors; their properties, united by this one similar detail, could not be more different despite their close proximity.



As Skeetah and Esch make their way back around to investigate, they realize that Randall, Big Henry, and Junior have followed them through the woods. Skeetah insists that someone needs to bring Junior home; he doesn't want his little brother to see him stealing. Randall tries to get Skeetah to abandon the mission entirely; it is too dangerous, and the repercussions could be too great. Skeetah protests; he could get nearly eight hundred dollars for the puppies, and he needs them to live. Seeing that Randall is still not convinced, Skeetah offers to give Randall some of the money from the puppies for basketball camp; this convinces Randall, who is touched that his brother would do something like that for him.

Skeetah advises everyone to start running the second they see him emerging from the barn, and then heads out of the woods and across the field towards the structure. Esch watches as Skeetah approaches the window at the side of the barn and tries to open it, but finds that it is locked. Skeetah pulls off his t-shirt, wraps it around his arm, and elbows the window twice; it shatters, and he climbs through.

Esch is seized by the sudden need to urinate. She knows she cannot hold it, and desperately searches the grass for a place where she can surreptitiously pull down her shorts and relieve herself. She finds a spot and goes, but just as she feels relief, she hears Randall's whistle, and is overcome by terror: the white property-owners have come home.

Esch stands up and looks through the trees; Skeetah pulls himself through the window as the white couple drive up in their pickup. There is a shaggy dog in the back of the truck, and it is barking agitatedly. Skeetah lands in the grass beneath the barn window just as the white people begin getting out of the car; as Skeetah starts running back towards the trees, the white man starts shouting after him. The man is old and couldn't possibly chase them through the woods, but Esch is nervous about the man's dog.

As Skeetah reaches the tree line, Esch, Junior, Randall, and Big Henry all begin running back through the woods. Behind them, Esch hears the white man's continued shouts, as well as the pop of a rifle and the barks of the man's dog as it chases after them. Skeetah grabs a tree branch and begins swinging at the dog as Esch, her brothers, and Big Henry run in a pack through the woods. As they arrive back at the Pit, the dog stops chasing them, but continues barking. Soon, **China** emerges from the shed and attacks the shaggy dog. She gets him by the neck and is about to shake him when Esch yells at Skeetah to call China off.

Skeetah is so desperate to keep the puppies alive that not only will he risk his own physical danger—but he promises to give the money away. This is the first passage where Skeetah is revealed to see the puppies as more than just a financial opportunity; they are a part of him, and his devotion to China dictates that he will do anything to keep them safe.



There is a wrinkle in Skeetah's plan, but he has come too far to turn back—he presses on, now as committed to his own survival in this mission as he is to the puppies'.



Even Esch's commonplace natural urges are tinged with violence in her newly pregnant state.



Again, Ward uses a common detail to link the unlikely similarities between the Pit and this property on the other side of it; protective, loyal, vicious dogs exist in both places, and represent very different but very real threats.



Even though China is a new mother, and has been shown to be entirely devoted to the survival of her brood, she comes out of the shed to protect Skeetah. She is as devoted to him as he is to her, and their symbiotic relationship is shown here to impact both of their desperate attempts at survival.



Skeetah reaches into his pocket and pulls out the vials of cow wormer he's stolen before calling for **China** to stop. As soon as he tells her to "hold," she lets go of the farmer's dog; the dog runs, yelping and bleeding, back into the woods.

China bests the other dog, demonstrating that her violent nature is intact and that she is, perhaps, even stronger and more protective than ever.



THE FIFTH DAY: SALVAGE THE BONES

The next morning, Esch barges into the bathroom, her bladder full to bursting, to find Skeetah examining himself in the mirror; he is shirtless, and his torso is covered in angry cuts. Skeetah leaves the bathroom so that Esch can relieve herself, and when she's finished, he comes back in. He explains that he sustained the scratches while clambering out of the barn window. He has an old, faded Ace Bandage in his hand, and begins wrapping his cuts with it. Esch knows that the bandage is one of Randall's old ones from basketball. Seeing Skeetah struggle to dress his angry wounds, she offers to help, and asks if the wrap is washed; Skeetah confirms that he washed and bleached it the night before.

This passage demonstrates the extreme nature of the rural poverty that Esch, Skeetah, and the rest of their family live in every day. Skeetah wounded himself stealing medicine to help his dogs survive—and he cannot even afford to treat the injuries he sustained in doing so in a totally safe, clean way. Though he's washed and sterilized the bandage, the family's inability to purchase basic medical supplies underscores the dire nature of their situation as the book's central tensions ramp up.



Skeetah points out that Esch ran slowly the day before, and he asks her why. She defensively says she doesn't know. Skeetah points out that Esch is gaining weight. She tries not to cry—she doesn't want to admit that she's pregnant to Skeetah when she's barely admitted it to herself. Skeetah clarifies that he doesn't think Esch is getting fat—she's "just growing up, maybe." Skeetah pins the bandages and leaves the bathroom, and Esch quietly vomits into the sink.

In the last chapter, Skeetah attempted to confront Esch about the truth of her relationship with Manny; here, he asks about her physical appearance, cluing Esch even further into the idea that Skeetah knows something about what's really going on with her.



When she's finished throwing up, Esch pulls herself up onto the counter so that she can look at her body. Her breasts have grown fuller, and though her stomach is by no means protruding, Esch can see a new "layer of meat" around her bellybutton. Esch pushes against the "honeydew curve," long and slight, hoping it will sink into her like fat; the curve resists though. She decides to start dressing in more loose-fitting clothing, borrowed from her brothers, until none of them have a choice "about what can be seen [...] and what will turn [them all] to stone."

Esch knows that to reveal a secret (and a vulnerability) that is this important and intense in the all-male world she occupies would be to turn her family "to stone"—in other words, Esch believes that her secret would paralyze and alienate her brothers and her father, leaving her feeling even more remote and isolated than she already does.



Today, Daddy is not gathering supplies for the storm; he is underneath his truck, working on the undercarriage. As Esch walks past him and Junior, who is helping him by passing him tools, Daddy asks Esch to find her brothers; he needs their help. Esch tries to keep walking, but Daddy orders her to get into the truck and start it up when Junior gives her the cue. Daddy gives her instructions for how to start the truck and then disappears underneath it. A few minutes later, Junior hops up into the passenger seat and tells Esch to start it. She turns the key, but nothing happens. After another two tries, the engine still won't start, and Esch jumps out of the car, walking away against Junior's protests that his older siblings are always leaving him behind.

In the yard, Skeetah and Manny stand talking while **China** sits between them, snapping at gnats. Manny flinches every time China's powerful jaws close. China's mouth is still stained with the blood of the farmer's dog, and Manny suggests Skeetah give her a bath; Skeetah insists he's going to wait until right before an upcoming fight to clean her so that she is "shining." Manny asks Skeetah if he really plans to fight China in her current state, with her teats full of milk; Skeetah answers that he's not fighting China, but still wants to bring her to the fight so that the other dogfighters don't forget about China.

Manny tells Skeetah that his cousin Rico is bringing his dog, Kilo, to participate in the next fight; Kilo is the dog that sired **China's** puppies, and Manny has always loved to brag about Kilo's size and strength. As China grew bigger and more fierce, Manny tried to ignore her size, strength, and beauty by talking about Kilo all the time, but when China and Kilo mated—and China sunk her teeth into Kilo's neck—it became clear that China was just as much of a "fire dog" as Rico's.

Manny warns Skeetah that **China** is not going to be "as boss as she used to be" going forward. Now that she has given birth, she is "less strong," but to nurse and nurture at the price of one's strength is, according to Manny, the "price of being female." He looks at Esch as he says this. Skeetah laughs, and argues that motherhood is when animals—and humans—"come into they strength;" it's only as mothers that they have the power of having "something to protect."

Though Esch has serious problems of her own going on, she is still at the beck and call of the men in her life. Her father's masculine preoccupation with getting his truck in order contrasts Esch's more feminine preoccupation with her body in the previous scene, showing how divergent her interests and needs are from those around her.



This passage shows clearly how frightened Manny is of China's power. She is clearly an exceptionally strong dog—a fact that Skeetah doesn't want the other local boys from the dog fights to forget, as his livelihood and his reputation depend so much on China's reputation.



In this passage, Esch reflects on Manny's desire to ignore China's intimidating feminine strength and focus only on Kilo's masculine power—the whole time, though, Manny has been more afraid of China's might than any other dog around, and rightly so.



This passage reflects the fears that Esch is dealing with in this chapter. She thinks that revealing her pregnancy will make her seem vulnerable or weak, but in Skeetah's eyes, motherhood is not a flattening burden but rather a galvanizing force which emboldens and strengthens female humans and animals alike. Their desire to protect what they've created is an advantage, not a vulnerability.



Esch worries that Manny secretly thinks she is weak because she is a girl. She attempts to change the subject by asking Skeetah if he has given **China** the wormer yet. He says that he tried to earlier, but she wouldn't take it. Manny instructs Skeetah on how to mix the medicine with oil so that its potency doesn't poison the dog, and Skeetah then tells Esch to go get some oil from the house. Esch gets bacon grease from the house, and when she returns to the shed, Manny is gone. Skeetah asks Esch to get him a bowl to mix the medicine in, and she begrudgingly goes back up to the house. While she's there, she uses the bathroom and frets over the fact that Manny has left.

Back in the shed, Esch and Junior watch Skeetah mix up the medicine. Manny returns, having forgotten his lighter, but no one can find it. While he looks for it, Esch quietly longs to touch him. Manny leaves again and Skeetah feeds **China** the medicine, calling her his "bitch" as she laps it up.

Esch leaves the shed, thinking about talk she's heard from girls at school—talk about how to get rid of an unwanted baby. She has heard that taking a large quantity of birth control pills, drinking bleach, or throwing oneself onto a car from a great height are all ways to get rid of a fetus, but Esch knows she could never get her hands on birth control pills, and isn't brave enough to drink bleach or throw herself onto something sharp or metallic. Esch knows she has no options.

Esch is in the bathroom, and she can hear her father's truck rolling very slowly up the driveway. She knows that Daddy drives slow when he is "bombed-out drunk." She pulls the bathroom curtain to the side and looks out into the yard, where she watches Skeetah and her drunken father have a confrontation. Skeetah is working on the kennel, and Daddy accuses him of stealing wood from the hurricane pile. Daddy grabs Skeetah by the arm, and **China** suddenly runs out of the shed as if to attack Daddy. Skeetah calls for her to hold, and she stops in her tracks.

Daddy warns Skeetah that if **China** ever attacks him, he will either take her into the woods and shoot her or call the county pound and make Skeetah watch as she is taken away. Daddy tells Skeetah that he's trying to save their family, and then orders him to return the wood to the hurricane pile. Daddy walks up towards the house, shuffling drunkenly.

Though Manny has shown himself, over and over again, to be casually cruel and thoughtless—and sometimes even pointedly disdainful—when it comes to Esch, or to any mention of femininity, she still finds herself pining for him when he leaves. She has constructed an idea of him in her head and thus created a myth—a myth which will prove dangerous in the future.



Skeetah's affection for China is real, but the language he uses to describe her—calling her a "bitch," which (though scientifically accurate in terms of her being a female dog) has derogatory connotations—demonstrates the wariness even he still harbors about femininity and female power.



Esch's feelings of wanting to get rid of her pregnancy intensify after hearing Manny talk about how motherhood makes females weak. It's also heartbreaking that her family doesn't have the means for the birth control pills that would have spared her an unwanted pregnancy in the first place, let alone to buy a ton of pills now to try to miscarry.



Skeetah's mother is dead and, in many ways, China is a mother figure to him as much as she is a child or daughter figure. When China confronts Daddy, the tense moment represents the clash of two different "parents" to which Skeetah is beholden. He hasn't been helping Daddy get ready for the storm at all, and has instead been focusing on China, creating distrust and bad feelings in his father that come to a head in this passage.



Daddy is both frightened of China and fed up with her (and all she represents). She is taking up Skeetah's time and attention, and this is in many ways as much a threat to Daddy and his authority as an actual physical attack from China would be.



THE SIXTH DAY: A STEADY HAND

The next morning, Esch awakens to the sound of Daddy knocking down the chicken coop—the chickens that roam the Pit have long abandoned it, and Daddy wants to use the wood to fortify the house against the storm. Esch has been sitting on the sofa reading about Jason and **Medea** all day, but she cannot concentrate—she is terribly hungry, and there is not enough food to eat. Skeetah has been out in the shed all night, and Esch decides to go see if she can offer him any help with China and the puppies.

When Esch gets to the shed, the puppies are nursing happily while **China** relaxes, but Skeetah insists something is wrong. They have been nursing for nearly an hour, he says, and normally she would push them away from her after so long, but she hasn't moved. Skeetah fears he has given China too much wormer—more than that, he worries that Manny purposefully gave him bad instruction on how to fix the medicine so that China would get sick. Esch insists that Manny would never do something like that, but Skeetah isn't so sure.

Esch suggests Skeetah go take a bath to clean his wounds and take his mind off the dogs, but he refuses. Esch reminds Skeetah that **China** is not the only one who must appear clean and healthy at the fight; Skeetah needs to keep up appearances, too. Skeetah goes inside to bathe, leaving Esch in charge of China. As he walks out of the shed, he sees Junior standing at the door and warns him not to touch anything.

Esch and Junior watch as **China**, just as Skeetah predicted she would, kicks away the puppies. Four remain: the white one, the red one, the runt, and the black-and-white one. China sleeps while the puppies mew and roll on the floor. Junior tells Esch the puppies need to get back to China, but Esch warns him not to touch them. As Esch watches China settle in for a nap, she realizes how tired she is herself.

Junior starts grabbing the puppies and moving them closer to **China**, and Esch urges him to be careful not to wake China up. Junior holds the runt instead of putting it next to China, though, and Esch squeezes his arm until he drops the puppy—if Skeetah had come in or if China had woken up, she says, they'd both be in big trouble. Esch apologizes for hurting Junior, and when Junior asks if they can go to the park, Esch agrees to take him.

Daddy's endless storm preparation—in spite of the ambivalence of everyone else around him—renders him a Cassandra figure. A staple of Greek myth who was blessed with clairvoyance but cursed with the caveat that her predictions would always fall on deaf or unbelieving ears, Daddy's relentless preaching about the storm mirrors the dramatic irony of Cassandra's predicament.



Skeetah loves China to the point of paranoia—she is slightly sluggish today, and Skeetah is suddenly sure that he has allowed himself to be duped into drugging his beloved dog by those who wish to see China's seat at the top of the dogfighting food chain unsettled. Esch, of course, defends Manny's character, unable to believe that the boy she thinks she loves would do such a thing.



Junior, as always, hovers at the periphery of his older siblings' antics, desperate for the chance to observe and participate in any way he can.



Just as Esch got the idea that she might be pregnant in the first place from watching China give birth, Esch now feels her own physical state affected by observing China's.



Junior is so desperate to have a part in things that he takes a major risk in this passage by handling the puppies. Junior could get attacked by China or reprimanded by Skeetah if caught, and yet his need to have a hand in the puppies' lives—and in those of his siblings—is so potent that he puts his own well-being at risk.



Skeetah comes back, and Esch tells him she and Junior are going to the park. Skeetah puts the puppies in a box and wakes **China** gently, then leashes her; he wants to bring her, too, so that she can get some exercise and “walk out” whatever is making her so tired. From the house, Junior grabs a bike that he once found in the street, and the three of them—plus an unenthusiastic China—set off for the park.

At the park, Manny is playing basketball with Big Henry, Randall, and some other neighborhood boys while his girlfriend Shaliyah watches with her friends. Esch wonders if Shaliyah notices all the little things she notices about Manny, and tries not to squirm in the heat as her breasts throb.

When the game is finished, Skeetah is still jogging around the park with **China** on the leash, trying to get her to sweat out the wormer. Randall and Big Henry talk about basketball camp; Randall knows that the coach will pick between him and another boy on the team for a coveted camp scholarship. Randall knows he is a better player and harder worker than the other boy, and is already dreaming cockily of all the basketball scouts who will notice him at the camp.

Esch watches Manny and Shaliyah flirt and wishes she could pull her own heart out of her chest—and pull the baby from her womb. Big Henry approaches Esch and asks if she wants to come sit in his car, where it’s a little bit cooler. She agrees, and turns away from the spectacle of Manny and Shaliyah. In the parking lot, she listens to music with Big Henry and her brothers. After a little while, they all decide to head back to the Pit, and Big Henry drives home alongside Skeetah and **China**, who are trotting through the dusk.

Back home, **China**’s puppies whine for milk. China is exhausted from her long, hard run, and makes a wet choking sound with each breath. Daddy is still working on the coop, and he calls Randall to come help him—after all his hard work, he has only been able to knock down one wall of the chicken coop. He tells Randall and Esch that the approaching storm has a name now, and “like the worst, she’s a woman.” The storm is called Katrina.

Though China is still a new, nursing mother, Skeetah has become convinced that she’s been poisoned, and is desperate to right the wrong he feels he’s brought upon her—even though the circumstances may be beyond his control.



Watching Manny and Shaliyah, Esch is reminded both of her burning desire for Manny and the fact that she is carrying his child—both reasons she feels she should have an advantage over Shaliyah.



Though Randall is in the background for most of the novel, in this passage he reveals that he has much more concrete dreams than any of his siblings; he knows he could make something of himself if given the chance, but he is held back by poverty and circumstance.



Big Henry seems to intuit—or observe—just how badly Esch is suffering, and he comes to her rescue by offering her the chance to look away from the objects of her pain and focus on having fun with her friends and siblings. Big Henry is one of the few positive older male figures in Esch’s life, and his kindness catches her off-guard every time.



China’s exhaustion is contrasted by the rising-up of a new “mother” figure in the novel; the storm, Katrina, has been named and declared a woman. Daddy calls women the “worst,” referring perhaps not just to their might but to their vindictiveness.



Daddy instructs Randall to get onto his tractor and drive it towards the coop to knock it down. Randall doesn't like the idea of doing this task in the dark, but Daddy insists that the storm is approaching and there isn't any time to waste. Randall says Daddy could drive the tractor best, but Daddy insists he doesn't see as well as Randall. Junior follows Randall and Daddy over to the tractor while Esch helps Skeetah and Big Henry put **China** in the shed, where she lies down and seems to fall asleep immediately. Skeetah worries that he has worked China too hard, but Big Henry assures him that China's going to be fine. Skeetah tries to get China to eat, but she is too tired. Her puppies creep closer and closer to her and begin to nurse.

Esch peeks out into the yard; Junior is shadowing Randall, and climbs up onto the tractor to help him. Daddy tries to dissuade Junior from doing so, but even Randall insists Junior won't be in the way. Randall starts the engine and the tractor surges forward—Daddy warns Randall that there is chicken wire stuck in the grille, and after Randall stops the tractor Daddy begins pulling at the wire.

Almost angrily, Skeetah tries to get **China** to eat, but she is tired and shaking. The red puppy, confused, squirms around China's food dish, looking for milk. Outside, the tractor engine turns over, as if Randall has started it up again; Daddy shouts "Don't do it," but his words are garbled, and Randall starts the tractor, easing it forward. Daddy yells for Randall to stop; his arm is twisted in the chicken wire.

In that instant, **China** lurches her head forward and snaps the red puppy up in her jaw; she whips the pup back and forth, chewing at it. Skeetah yells for her to stop, but she does not. Randall, meanwhile, tries to stop the tractor, but it is positioned on a hill, and it keeps moving forward. Daddy wrenches his hand free, and Esch can see that his hand and shirt are covered in oil. As Daddy walks towards the light of the shed, though, Esch sees that the oil is in fact blood.

This passage sets up a duality: Esch, poised on the threshold of the shed but still in sight of the yard, is about to watch two scenes unfold simultaneously. Her attention is pulled in two directions: Daddy's seemingly drunken, desperate attempt to continue with his storm preparations even as night falls, and Skeetah's paranoia about China's well-being even after a full afternoon of attending to her. Both men are trying to control nature, in very different ways.



Junior, so desperate—again and still—to be a part of his siblings' tasks is unknowingly putting himself in the way of serious danger as the dismantling of the coop starts going wrong before it even starts.



Disaster begins to strike in two places at once, as Esch bears helpless witness to both the tension in the shed and the accident unfolding in the yard.



A lot is happening in this passage. As two extremely violent events occur parallel to one another, Ward contrasts the feminine or motherly violence of China's attack on her puppy with the masculine violence of Daddy's tractor accident. Though one instance is "female" and one is "male," Ward both highlights and subverts the traits in each. China, though a mother, aggressively attacks one of her own in a decidedly unmotherly display of violence, while Daddy loses control and has the fingers of his less-dominant (some might read more feminine) hand, the hand that bears his wedding ring and the last symbol of his attachment to his wife, ripped away.



China flings the “pulpy puppy” away from her, and it lands on the floor of the shed. Randall runs towards Daddy and the shed as Daddy collapses; he is missing the middle, ring, and pinky fingers of his left hand. Skeetah, crying, yells at China, asking her how she could kill her own puppy; Randall and Big Henry struggle to stop Daddy’s hand as it bleeds. Esch looks directly at China, who is as “bloody-mouthed and bright-eyed as Medea. If China could speak, Esch thinks, Esch would ask her: “Is this what motherhood is?”

The intense violence happening in the shed mirrors the violence happening out on the Pit. As Esch—who seems to have one foot in the shed and one foot out of it—observes both horrible displays of violence, she wonders if she has, in becoming a mother, condemned herself to a life filled with gore and disaster at every turn.



THE SEVENTH DAY: GAME DOGS AND GAME MEN

The morning after Daddy’s accident, Esch recalls the events that followed it directly. Big Henry drove everyone to the hospital; Daddy sat in the front seat with his hand wrapped in a towel while Esch, Junior, and Randall sat in the back seat, trying not to choke on the smell of blood in the car. The group took the back way to the hospital, and when they arrived, Randall and Big Henry half-carried Daddy inside, where a nurse wheeled him away after seeing how badly he’d damaged his hand. By the time Randall and Daddy came back out to the waiting room, it was three in the morning, and Daddy’s eyes were shining as if he were drunk.

Though the actual accident seemed strange, uncanny, mythic, and exceptional, bathed in blood and darkness, the fallout of the accident was much more banal and quotidian. Daddy, whose alcoholism had already made him a mumbling, stumbling figure, is now zonked on pain medication and antibiotics—and completely incapacitated, unable to continue his storm preparations.



Now, Esch wakes up to find everyone but Junior still asleep; Big Henry is on the sofa, and Daddy and Randall are in their rooms. Skeetah and **China**—who’d stayed behind in the shed while everyone else went to the hospital—are gone.

Though everyone else dropped everything to attend to Daddy, Skeetah—as usual—made China his only priority, in spite of the viciousness and volatility she displayed.



Esch goes into Daddy’s room, bringing him chicken soup and helping him adjust the television. He wants to watch the weather channel, which reports that **Katrina** has made landfall in Miami and that mandatory evacuations may be issued as the storm continues to move northwest across the state. Daddy drifts off to sleep, and Esch steps out into the hall, where she can hear the sounds of China barking loudly in the field behind the house.

The continuing threat of Katrina advances steadily, while China’s barks—a reminder of her viciousness and her betrayal of her own puppy—form a different kind of threat in Esch’s mind.



Randall has a basketball game later today, and Esch oils her hair and gets ready. Skeetah comes back inside, sweating and stinking. Esch asks what **China** was barking about, but Skeetah insists it was nothing. When she presses him further, he says that China forgot him last night; now, he is going to keep her on a chain in the yard for “as long as it takes” for her to remember who is in charge.

Skeetah has been so devoted to China and her well-being that he has, he thinks, allowed her to forget both who he is and who she is. He now attempts to use some tough love to remind her of both, displaying his first sense of real detachment from her so far.



Everyone waits outside near Big Henry's car; it is almost time to leave for the game. Big Henry asks Esch if she thinks Randall is ready for the game, and she insists he is. Marquise tries to flirt lewdly with Esch, and Big Henry urges Marquise to stop. She hurries into the house to fetch Randall, and can feel the two boys watching her as she heads across the yard.

The group drives to the gym at the local elementary school. The gym is dark and hot, and Esch sits with Junior, Big Henry, Marquise, and Skeetah as Randall warms up on the court. Skeetah tells the others how earlier, when the puppies nursed, Skeetah held **China**'s muzzle shut and bopped her on the nose every time she moved her head towards them. Skeetah is determined not to be "beat," and to ensure that the three remaining puppies live.

Big Henry offers Junior money for a snack, and Junior takes it and runs off without even saying thank you. Big Henry offers Esch some money, too, but she doesn't take it, and instead excuses herself to go to the bathroom. As she makes her way out of the gym she watches Randall on the court, and doesn't even notice when she bumps smack into Rico—Manny's cousin. Manny and Shaliyah are with him, and though Rico tries to talk to Esch, she runs past them towards the bathroom.

Esch uses the bathroom and when she comes out of her stall, Manny is by the sinks, waiting for her. She tells him he's in the wrong bathroom; he replies only that he's been thinking about her. He pushes her back into the stall, sits on the toilet, and unzips his pants, revealing his erect penis. He pulls off Esch's shorts and underwear and the two begin having sex; Esch grabs Manny's face and looks into his eyes. Manny twists his head to the side again and again, but Esch keeps pulling him back, demanding he look at her.

Manny grabs Esch's sides with his hands and presses his thumbs into her stomach. He looks down at her, and Esch knows that he is seeing her—seeing the fact that she is pregnant. Manny swears and throws Esch off of him, then stands and leaves the bathroom. Esch tries to leave the bathroom three separate times, but each time she walks out the door, she starts crying again at the thought that Manny at last saw her—and then turned away from her.

Esch is—again, and constantly it seems—the subject of the male gaze as the boys around her make lewd jokes at her expense and look at her as if she is an object or commodity.



Skeetah's motivations continue to morph and grow more complicated as the novel progresses; his desire to see the puppies through to the six-week mark is now compounded by his desire to dominate China and to ensure that she's not responsible for any more of the puppies' deaths.



Esch is shy and nervous at the game—as she attempts to hide her pregnancy, the physical symptoms keep making her life more and more difficult, thrusting her into situations she doesn't want to be in, such as this run-in with Manny and Shaliyah.



This time, when Esch has sex with Manny, she handles the act differently. Normally a passive observer, Esch decides to be an active and even demanding participant in this encounter—she wants for Manny to acknowledge her, to feel something for her, and she both does and doesn't want him to know the truth about her pregnancy.



When Manny realizes that Esch is pregnant, her plan to get him to "see" her backfires—he recoils from her, leaving her dejected and feeling utterly outcast.



When Esch finally comes out of the bathroom, Junior is standing outside waiting for her; Big Henry sent him to come check on her. He asks if Esch is okay, and she says that she is; the two of them walk back to the bleachers arm-in-arm, and Esch is upset to realize that Manny, Shalayah, and Rico are sitting just a few seats below them. Skeetah, noticing Esch's demeanor and intuiting what has happened, spits a curse in Manny's direction. Rico turns around and walks up the bleachers toward Skeetah; "I heard your bitch had our puppies," he says, asking if Skeetah is still planning on splitting **China's** litter with him down the middle.

Skeetah deflects Rico's questions, replying that because it was **China's** first litter most of the puppies were born dead. Rico says he heard from Manny that one of the puppies looks like Kilo, and that's the one he wants; Skeetah replies that the puppy is dead because China killed it and all that is left for Rico is the runt. Esch knows that Skeetah is omitting the all-white puppy, the China clone. As if on cue, Rico calls down to Manny to confirm that there is an all-white puppy in the litter, and Manny does; Skeetah tells Rico it is too early for him to be trying to claim one of the puppies; they won't be ready to go until they're six weeks old.

Rico, enraged at Skeetah's attitude, threatens to "fuck [him] up." Manny tries to calm Rico down, but Skeetah yells at Manny, to which Rico expresses his outrage at the idea that Manny would let Skeetah talk to him that way. Skeetah punches Rico, and soon a fight breaks out. Big Henry tries to pull them apart, but Manny is fueling the fire, and soon Marquise and Big Henry are involved, too. The referee, down on the court, blows his whistles at the boys, but they don't stop fighting. Randall's coach, realizing that it is Randall's family up in the stands causing a scene, takes Randall out of the game and orders him to go home.

Esch pulls Junior towards the doors as the fight migrates outside. Randall follows the group, demanding to know what has happened. Rico snarlingly tells Skeetah he'll see him and his dog tomorrow, and Skeetah vows that Rico will never get one of **China's** puppies. Randall warns Skeetah not to fight China—if something happens to her, the remaining puppies will be motherless. Marquise says that his cousin will fight his dog against Kilo on China's behalf. If Kilo wins, Rico gets a puppy of his choice. Skeetah agrees to the terms and spits blood down onto the ground.

Once again, Big Henry—with Junior as his proxy—has gone out of his way to look out for Esch when no one else will. The secret of her infatuation with—and rejection by—Manny is getting harder and harder to hide, and as her brothers begin to catch on, a new tension floats in the air, comingling with the already tense, volatile atmosphere between Rico and Skeetah.



There is a delicate web of secrets, lies, and withholdings being woven between Skeetah, Manny, and Rico in this passage. Rico is a dangerous figure, imposing and shady, and as Skeetah tires to dodge Rico's invasive questions, he finds his attempts at secrecy and privacy thwarted by the fact that Manny is in the middle—and his allegiances lie with his true family, Rico.



Once again, Skeetah's prioritization of China, her puppies, and his dog fighting enterprise leads to trouble for the rest of his family, and Skeetah doesn't even seem to care. Randall must pay the price for Skeetah's bad behavior, once again putting his own dreams on hold in order to tend to his little brother's mistakes.



As the violence between Skeetah and Rico threatens to escalate, their friends and relatives step in to try and defuse the situation. An uneasy bet or bargain is struck—both boys, obsessed with laying claim to and controlling China's puppies, begrudgingly agree to put their financial futures in the hands of a chance fight.



THE EIGHTH DAY: MAKE THEM KNOW

Junior wakes Esch up the next morning by shaking her and asking if she's planning on attending the fight. He is only allowed to go, he says, if she goes. He also tells her that Randall and Skeetah are arguing—Randall insists that Skeetah shouldn't be taking **China** to the fight, regardless of whether or not she's going to participate. Randall is angry, Junior says, that Skeetah keeps "ruining things," like his basketball game and his chance at attending camp. Esch ignores Junior's updates, willing herself back to sleep.

Esch reads her mythology book in bed, but keeps stopping in the middle of the **Medea** story. She is confused by the author's note about different versions of the tale; one in which Medea allows her lover to kill her brother, and one in which Medea herself kills him. As she reads under the covers, she feels that Medea is under there with her, sweating up the bed.

Out in the hallway, Junior is sitting on the floor outside of Esch's door. He lets her know that Randall has fixed Daddy's breakfast, and that Daddy, after spending some time hollering about the approaching hurricane, has fallen back asleep. Esch walks into her father's room and finds him asleep, beer cans on his night table. She walks back out and closes the door, and Junior begs her to go to the fight so that he can attend, too. Esch at last agrees.

Esch sits on the toilet and watches out the window as Skeetah gives **China** a bath. As Skeetah washes her with dish soap so that she gleams, Randall approaches him and tells him, again, that he shouldn't be taking China to the fight. Randall is upset about his basketball game and the way Skeetah interrupted it by fighting. Skeetah defends his choice to fight with Rico, and insists that Randall doesn't have to come to the fight; it has nothing to do with him. Randall insists on going, though—he reminds Skeetah of his promise to pay for camp if the puppies sell. As Randall walks away, Skeetah pets and admires China, who is gleaming "cocaine white."

Esch, Skeetah, Randall, Junior, and **China** head through the woods towards the clearing where the fight is to be held. Though the forest is quiet, Esch thinks she can hear, in the blowing of the wind, the approach of Katrina "coming like the quiet voice of someone talking before they walk through the doorway of a room." Esch's stomach feels full of water, but she does not say anything to her brothers; she thinks of Medea's journey, which took her to the water, where death was close at hand.

Esch is exhausted, both physically and mentally. Her brothers' arguments, obsessions, and problems are too much for her to bear—and now, as the big fight looms before her, she finds herself unwilling to even get up and engage in the chaos all around her.



Esch loves picturing herself as Medea when she imagines herself as a goddess, beloved and worshipped by a lover. When the myth turns to Medea's relationship with her brother, however, the story hits too close to home, and Esch grows agitated, almost afraid to read on.



Though Esch is unwilling to deal with her brothers' drama—both due to her exhaustion and her fear of what terrors could befall them all—she knows that Junior just wants to be a part of things, and reluctantly agrees to be the bridge between him and his older brothers' antics.



Though Skeetah and Randall have serious things to discuss, Skeetah seems to really be concerned only with making China gleam. He shines her up "cocaine white"—a blinding white that represents both illicit danger and intense purity, the only truly clean thing on the whole Pit—in order to demonstrate both his control over her and her own innate beauty.



As Esch walks into the ring where the dog fight is to be held—one of the novel's most tense, loaded moments—she feels, for the first time, all three of her "mother" figures surrounding her. China, Katrina, and Medea all represent both power and destruction, and as Esch enters into a place marked by violence and death, she is both fearful and emboldened.



In the clearing, about fifteen boys and their dogs stand in clumps, talking and smoking weed and cigarettes. Esch realizes that she is the only girl present. Junior runs off to play with Marquise's little brother, while Esch looks at the many dogs—all different, but none as beautiful or as white as **China**. Esch knows all the boys gathered here are hopeful for a win—to be able to return home from the woods, “their own dangerous Aegean Sea, to be able to say *My bitch did it.*”

Marquise introduces Esch and her brothers to his cousin Jerome, whose dog Boss will be fighting for China. Boss is enormous, fat and tall with bowed legs. Marquise pets his own dog—a yellow pit named Lala whom he never fights. Across the clearing, Esch and her brothers make out Kilo, straining against the leash Rico holds as he digs excitedly in the dirt. Jerome looks at Kilo, and assures the others Boss will be able to beat him; Boss has fought “from Baton Rouge to Pensacola” and has won a great deal of fights. As Esch looks to Skeetah and **China**, who sits calmly at his side, she realizes that no one else present loves their dog the way Skeetah loves China.

The boys leave their dogs with their friends and form a circle in the middle of the clearing to discuss the order and terms of the fights. As they argue and bicker, Esch notices the rising wind, and wonders whether **Katrina** is actually coming for them after all. She feels like Medea, standing “womanly ripe” on the deck of a ship, preparing to bless her heroes before they go into battle.

After the boys finish talking, Skeetah takes **China**'s leash back and she stands still at his side. Esch notices that while some of the other dogs sniff at one another and play, none of them approach China; she has developed a fierce reputation, and none of them will dare test her. As the first few fights unfold, Skeetah and China watch calmly. China licks Skeetah's fingers and never once gets riled up despite the commotion all around her.

At last, it is time for Boss and Kilo to fight—the fight that will determine whether Rico gets to take the puppy of his choice from Skeetah for free. Rico and Jerome take a minute to pet and whisper to their dogs, and then sic them on one another. The dogs tussle and bite at one another, drawing blood. After the first round, there is no definitive winner; after wiping their dogs down, Jerome and Rico send their dogs into the ring once more. As they continue fighting, it becomes clear that the dogs are too well-matched; neither will fold or give. Skeetah urges Jerome to call the fight, and he does; both Jerome and Rico call their dogs off and drag them out of the pit.

Once again, Esch is the only female in a male-dominated space—this one is considerably more hostile than the Pit, however, and the boys around her have a clear desire both to own the female objects at their disposal—their dogs—and simultaneously glorify and demean them.



At the heart of all of this hypermasculine posturing and attempts at wresting control, dominance, and authority from one another are actual animals—actual, natural beings. The boys in Bois Sauvage fight their dogs for sport and profit, and the relationships between dogs and owners are always volatile. Esch realizes in this passage that only, it seems, in the case of China and Skeetah is there true love and respect—to all the other boys, their dogs are just pawns for them to try to control.



The various “mother” figures throughout the novel are comingling in this scene as Esch feels the presence both of the storm and of Medea—the force of nature itself, and the woman determined to conquer it—and must decide which one she is.



China has been depicted as exceptional and strange through her magical, gleaming, all-white coloring throughout the whole novel. Now, though, in the midst of the other dogs, it becomes clear that China's appearance is not what sets her apart. Her reputation is such a vicious one that no one will even go near her; this adds another layer to the contrast between her sweet demeanor and violent killer instincts.



The two dogs' energies are evenly matched, and it quickly becomes clear that the fight between them is going nowhere. Rather than allow their dogs to fight to the death, Rico and Jerome pull their dogs out. Even in this vicious world there is room, it seems, not just for reason but for compassion—or at the very least, pure self-preservation.



Rico insists that Kilo won the fight, but no one else supports his claim. Everybody can see that the dogs' fight ended in a draw. Rico is insistent on getting his puppy, but Randall insists that the night has ended in a tie. As Rico threatens Skeetah, Randall steps in between the two boys, telling them to stop fighting; there is no way, he says, to decide the quarrel between them. Skeetah, with an impish smile, says that there is one way; he unhooks **China's** leash from her collar, and she smiles, too.

Randall excoriates Skeetah for wanting to fight **China** and begs him to think of China's puppies, who need their mother. Skeetah shrugs Randall off, though, and leads China away so that he can "talk" to her. Junior comes over to Randall and Esch and asks if China is really going to fight; they instruct him to go play in the woods, and to stay away until the fight is done. Across the clearing, Esch spots Manny, who looks at her concernedly. She avoids his gaze, imagines herself tall as Medea and dressed in resplendent robes, and walks over to Skeetah. As she approaches him she can see that he is hiding a razor in his mouth. He talks to China in a low, breathy voice, pumping her up and telling her to "make them know" what she can do.

The fight begins; Skeetah has removed **China's** leash and collar, and as soon as he tells her to "go," she shoots across the clearing towards Kilo and sinks her teeth into his neck. She rips fur and draws blood, but Kilo bites her leg and shakes it—a weak and easy move, Esch thinks. China retaliates, and her bite is so bad that Rico calls a time-out. As soon as Skeetah calls China's name, she turns around and smiles at him "as if to say *I am coming, love, I am here.*"

Rico and Skeetah tend to their dogs. Esch watches across the clearing as Manny whispers to Rico that **China** "ain't shit, ain't got no heart." After a brief reprieve, the fight begins again, and the dogs bite at one another; Kilo tears at one of China's milk-swollen breasts and shakes, refusing to let go. Skeetah yells for China to "jump," and she uses her feet to push away from Kilo—her nipple is torn away. Skeetah, seeing the carnage, calls another time out.

As tensions escalate and things get hairy—more dangerous even than at the basketball game—Skeetah makes a quick, dangerous decision. His and China's twinned excitement about her stepping into the ring again shows the underlying propensity for violence (and the need for survival at any cost) that they both share.



Skeetah is forced to make a terrible decision: he knows that to declare a draw would be to lose the puppies, but that to fight China—to risk her own life—might be his only chance to retain his hold on the puppies and the money they promise. Skeetah clearly has faith in China's ability, though, to "make [the others] know" what she is made of, and prove that motherhood has indeed strengthened rather than weakened her.



Though everyone has predicted that China will be frail, if not outright weak, during a fight, she enters the ring enthusiastically and with both violence and vigor. At the same time, Esch observes a tenderness within the dog that speaks to the softness and capacity for love within her despite her fearsome exterior.



Manny has doubted China for a long time now; just as he expressed his doubts about her strength back in Skeetah's shed, he attempts to discredit her "heart" now. Manny's gendered denigration of China's strength and verve reveals how prejudiced and sexist he is, not just when it comes to human women but to females of all kinds. In a mirror of Manny's sexism, Kilo tears away one of China's teats—a symbol of her femininity—in a low, cruel attempt to wound her where she is both most vulnerable and most valuable.



As Skeetah tends to **China**, Rico taunts him from across the ring, stating that he doesn't want the white puppy after all—he wants one with “more Kilo in it.” Randall begs Skeetah to stop the fight, but Skeetah insists China hasn't lost yet—he puts her into the ring one more time. As the dogs meet for a third time, Esch thinks that the way they attack one another looks like an “embrace.” Skeetah calls for China to “make them know” over and over again as China viciously attacks Kilo, shutting her jaws around his neck. She tears out part of Kilo's throat, and Rico begs for the fight to stop. As Kilo keens and cries, China returns to Skeetah. Esch spots Manny across the ring, looking at her, Skeetah, and China with hate in his eyes.

Just like earlier in the novel, a character mistakes femininity for weakness, not realizing how wrong he is. Though it seems as if China is slated to lose as she enters the third round, it is her very femininity which wins her the fight. The appearance of her delicate “embrace” is in fact deadly, and as the fight comes to an end, China assures not only her own survival—but that of her puppies, and indeed, in a way, of her owner.



THE NINTH DAY: HURRICANE ECLIPSE

The next morning, Esch wakes up to the sound of someone throwing up in the bathroom. She worries that she is half-asleep, and that she is the one hunched over the toilet retching, but soon realizes she is still in bed—the sound belongs to someone else. She goes into the bathroom and finds Daddy throwing up into the toilet. He asks her to get Randall.

For the entirety of the novel, vomiting has been a specifically feminine act, associated with pregnancy. The reversal of the situation, with Daddy being the one sick in the bathroom, disorients and even frightens Esch.



In Randall and Skeetah's room, Randall is in bed but Skeetah isn't. After the fight last night, Skeetah washed **China** and covered her in antibiotic ointment, wrapping her wounds in the same washed-and-bleached Ace bandage he used just a few days ago to wrap his own wounds. Seeing Skeetah's empty bed now, Esch realizes he must have slept in the shed with China and the puppies.

Skeetah's devotion to China in this passage is, possibly, tinged with regret and remorse. The fact that her wounds are wrapped in the same Ace bandage Skeetah recently used symbolizes the symbiotic—even dangerous—bond between them.



Esch wakes Randall and tells him that Daddy is sick in the bathroom and asking for him. They go together to the bathroom, where Randall pulls Daddy off the floor and brings him back to bed. Daddy protests, saying he needs to be near the toilet, but Randall says he'll bring Daddy a garbage pail; the man needs to be in bed. Esch and Randall heave Daddy back into bed. Esch and Randall notice that there are several empty beer cans on the bedside table. Randall tells Daddy that he isn't supposed to drink with the medication for his hand, and this is probably why he's so sick. Daddy tries to get out of bed, claiming he has to get the house ready for the storm, but Randall insists that Daddy needs to stay in bed. He asks him to tell them all what needs to be done to prepare.

Daddy's desire—or, more likely, his need—to drink has directly impacted his health in a new way; by combining alcohol with his medication, he has incapacitated himself and diminished whatever illusions of control he had not just over storm preparation but his own body.



Outside, the wind has grown stronger. Esch and Randall look through Daddy's pickup truck for nails, hammers, drills, and spare boards to put up over the windows. Skeetah emerges from the shed and asks what they're up to; Randall explains that they need to prepare for the storm. Skeetah says he can't help, though, because he needs to tend to **China**. Randall turns on the car radio, where the news announces that Katrina, now a category three storm, is scheduled to make landfall nearby in Louisiana.

Skeetah says he needs to go to the store for supplies for **China**, and Randall tells him to pick up canned food while he's at it. Skeetah insists he doesn't have money for food, and Randall realizes Skeetah was intending to shoplift. Randall begs Skeetah not to get caught. Skeetah asks Esch and Randall to keep an eye on China.

Esch calls for Junior; she needs his help pulling nails from their bin. She can't find him anywhere, but she eventually locates him standing next to Daddy's bed, staring at Daddy while he sleeps. Esch pulls Junior out of Daddy's room, and Junior tells her that he's worried Daddy wasn't breaking. Esch warns Junior to stay out of the room, but Junior becomes hysterical, complaining that everyone always tries to keep him from the truth. He pulls out of his pocket something small and maroon—Daddy's bloody wedding ring—which he throws across the living room before running down the hall and out of the house.

Esch and Randall chase Junior to where he's hidden—beneath the house—and drag him out. Randall asks Junior what's wrong with him, and points out he could've gotten a disease pulling Daddy's wedding ring from his severed finger. When Randall asks why Junior salvaged the ring, Junior answers, "She gave it to him," sobbing and wailing.

Later, Esch and Randall recount the story about Junior and the ring to Skeetah—Esch has found the ring and cleaned it, though she threw up while doing so. Junior, still crying slightly, is picking nails out of the toolbox and dropping them in the truck bed. Esch says that she's put the ring in her drawer, for safekeeping; Skeetah suggests they look for Daddy's fingers, since they're "free protein" and could be fed to **China**. He is laughing, but seems only half-joking. Big Henry arrives to drive Skeetah to the store, and though he asks what's wrong with Junior, Skeetah hurries him away.

Skeetah again turns towards the maternal force of China and away from the paternal force of Daddy and his storm preparations—but Katrina, a new kind of mother, is on the way to rattle the Batiste siblings' concepts of femininity and violence.



Skeetah shows again how desperate he is—and to what great lengths he would go, even putting himself in danger—in order to keep China alive and healthy.



Junior has, over the course of the novel, been exposed to an escalating series of intense and terrifying things. Though Daddy insisted from the start that Junior was old enough to bear witness to certain things, this passage demonstrates the toll this witnessing has taken on Junior, stressing him and confusing him to the point of distress.



Junior's attachment to the ring is revealed in this passage to be an attachment to the idea of his dead mother—a longing for maternal influence and a connection to someone everyone else knew and lost but whom Junior never even got to experience.



Violence, death, and motherhood continue to be entwined in this passage as Esch symbolically preserves something technically tied to their mother while Skeetah discusses symbolically destroying something which was once a part of their father.



Esch, Randall, and Junior work together to prepare the house for the storm. They board up windows, clean and fill water jugs, cook the food in the fridge, and drive Daddy's truck to town to fill it with gas. They then park it at the edge of the pit, near the pond. Skeetah and Big Henry return home from the store; Skeetah has two giant bags of expensive dog food, but the only canned goods he's brought back for the family are peas and ramen noodles. Randall chastises Skeetah for getting such a slim selection, but Skeetah insists there was nothing left on the shelves. Esch worries that the food won't be enough for all of them; Skeetah says that if worse comes to worst, they can eat **China's** dog food, which tastes like pecans. Randall tells Skeetah that they are not dogs—and neither is Skeetah.

The false equivalency between dogs and humans that Skeetah has been espousing the entire novel is called out starkly for the first time in this passage, as Randall refuses to sink so low as to eat dog food out of desperation. It is almost as if Skeetah himself longs to be one of China's pups—he tends to her, sleeps in the shed with her, and here reveals that he has even consumed her food. Randall, though, doesn't see Skeetah's symbolic desire to be mothered by China for what it is—he simply doesn't want to sink to a new level of poverty, a level which requires him to eat food meant for animals.



THE TENTH DAY: IN THE ENDLESS EYE

Randall and Esch count and sort all the food they have in the house and become frustrated and frightened when they realize it will not be enough for all of them. Esch goes to use the bathroom, and while she's in there, she hears Randall and Daddy talking. She leaves the bathroom and listens at the door to Daddy's bedroom—he is telling Randall that there is a few hundred dollars to spare in case of an emergency. Besides, he says, FEMA and the Red Cross will always come through with food. Randall still worries that their stores won't be enough, but Daddy stubbornly insists they'll make do with what they have.

Daddy has been trying to prepare for the storm for days, but his efforts have been effectively thwarted—now, as his children try to take over preparations and control how they'll weather the storm, Daddy seems to reverse his tack and try to impress upon them that there are some things beyond their control.



With the windows boarded up, the house is hot and miserable, and everyone but Daddy hangs out in the yard for some air. Skeetah is busy washing and arranging all of **China's** things. Randall asks if Esch has any ideas about how to get some more food, but she says she doesn't have any. They all watch as China chases chickens around the yard until Skeetah calls her off.

As the storm bears down in earnest, Skeetah continues exhibiting a preoccupation with keeping China's things clean, neat, and perfect—as if she is a goddess and he is worshipping at her altar.



Randall suggests they all hunt for eggs, and urges Skeetah to stop fussing over **China** and her things and help out. The wind picks up as Randall and Esch begin their search, and Esch imagines that Medea has called it up just as she did in the myth of the Argonauts. Esch is tired, and barely has the energy to walk. The hunt is frustrating; the chickens are preparing for the storm, too, and have hidden their eggs well. Randall teaches Junior how to hunt for eggs, giving him the same instructions Esch remembers their mother giving her, Skeetah, and Randall years and years ago. Esch hunts and hunts, but can't find even a single egg.

Esch, too, feels the encroachment of elements of myth on real life—the winds are so powerful that they seem to her to be summoned directly from myth, and her fruitless search for eggs, traditionally symbols of rebirth and renewal, has a mythic quality in and of itself.



Junior, however, finds several eggs, and he and Esch bring them back up to the house so that she can hard boil them. As Junior and Randall place them in the pot, Esch counts them, and is excited to realize that there are twenty-four in total—not much, but something. While the two of them finish placing the eggs and filling the pot with water, Esch sits on the front steps of the house; she is the first to see Manny as he walks up the drive.

Manny calls for Randall, and the two go outside to talk while Esch finishes up the eggs. Manny and Randall talk about basketball, and Esch overhears Randall saying that one of his other teammates has been selected to receive the coveted scholarship to basketball camp. Esch lights the burner and overhears Randall and Manny’s conversation shift to the fight that broke out at the game—Randall says that Skeetah thinks Manny is “dogging” Esch. Manny denies it, insisting that he and Esch are “like family,” but Randall debunks this—he says that he and Manny are the only ones who are really close, and Manny’s relationships with Esch, Skeetah, and Junior are “not the same.” Manny says goodbye and turns to leave, and Esch hurries out of the house to catch him before he goes just as Randall goes inside.

When Esch catches up with Manny, he asks if Randall wants something—she says that it’s her, though, who has something to say to Manny. Manny tries to walk away, but Esch confesses that she’s pregnant, and the baby is his. Manny replies that he has “nothing” here at the pit; Esch is blinded by anger, and hears Skeetah’s words to **China** in her ears: “Make them know.” Esch attacks Manny as if she herself is China, tearing and scratching at him while screaming that she loves him. Partway through, she changes her statement, admitting that she “loved” Manny, past-tense. Manny asks Esch what’s wrong with her; she replies that Manny is what’s wrong.

Manny grabs a hold of Esch and throws her away from him into the dirt. He asks how she can know that he’s her child’s father when she sleeps with every boy who comes to visit the Pit. She insists that Manny is the only person she’s been with in a long time. Manny calls Esch a slut and runs away. As Esch watches him go, she prays that tomorrow everything will be washed clean. As Manny goes, Esch calls after him that “the baby will tell,” but the wind is blowing so hard that her voice is muted and quiet.

Junior’s discovery of the eggs is the first hopeful omen the Batistes have gotten in a while; still, the meager supply is barely enough to last all five of them a few days.



Manny’s lies and secrets are beginning to catch up with him, and he can no longer fall back on the excuse that he is close enough with the Batistes to be their family—it has become clear over the last several days that his allegiances lie elsewhere, and that nothing is thicker than blood.



In this passage, Esch invokes China as a mother figure and a model for how to assert her femininity as she hails her rage down upon Manny. Her conflicting feelings of love for Manny—she seems to be unsure whether she is in love with him or has fallen out of it—demonstrate how she has grown over the novel. She is not blindly fawning over Manny as she once was—she has been stung by his rejections and betrayals, and now prioritizes her own revenge.



Manny attempts to discredit Esch when she tells him something he doesn’t want to hear by making a pointed and aggressive insult against her femininity, denigrating how she has chosen to come into her own as a woman. At the end of their confrontation, it seems as if Esch has been defeated, or at least silenced—Ward is attempting to demonstrate the ways in which femininity is both desired and reviled by men, craved only when it’s convenient and rejected the moment things get tough.



Esch sits on the ground and thinks about **Medea**. When Jason betrayed her, she killed his new bride, the bride's father, and her own children, and then flew away into the wind. When Medea shrieked, Jason heard. Randall comes upon Esch and asks her what's wrong, but she insists she's fine. Randall tells her that the two of them need to return to the white people's house nearby for supplies. Esch doesn't want to go, but Randall begs for her help. Esch stops herself from crying and gets up, jogging towards the woods with Randall beside her.

As they run through the woods, Esch asks where Skeetah and Junior are; Randall replies that they're somewhere else in the forest. Esch notices that the woods are empty of birds and other animals; when she looks up at the sky, she sees huge flocks flying north, away from the storm. At the edge of the white people's property, Esch and Randall look into the yard. There are no cars parked anywhere, and the windows of the house and barn have been boarded up with plywood.

Esch and Randall approach the house and try to get the boards on the windows off; they can't, and when they grow frustrated, Randall punches at the boards, but only hurts his hand. Esch suggests they give up, but Randall wants to keep trying. He kicks at the boards, shattering the window behind it; he kicks once more, and the board cracks in two, though nails hold it in place. Randall nurses his sore knee and tells Esch to look inside the house; she peers through the boards and sees nothing of use. She suggests that the owners took everything with them when they evacuated, and Randall at last admits defeat.

Randall and Esch head back through the woods towards the Pit. Halfway through, they encounter **China**, who has caught a chicken in her mouth and killed it. She drops it on the ground in front of them and runs away; Esch suggests they pick the chicken up, take it home, and cook it, but Randall walks away from the bloody carcass towards home.

Back at the house, Skeetah has **China** up on the bed, and she is licking his face despite the fact that her jaw is still red and bloody with the chicken's guts. When Randall asks what China is doing in the house, Skeetah explains he's bringing her inside for the storm. Randall tells Skeetah to keep China in the shed, but Skeetah says they need to be inside. Randall heads for Daddy's room and calls for Daddy to weigh in on the issue; Skeetah follows him into the room. Daddy says that the dogs can't stay inside. Skeetah says that if the dogs have to stay outside, then he'll stay outside.

Esch has lashed out violently in order to make herself seen and heard, following in the footsteps of the mother figures in her life—China, Medea, and though she does not yet know it, Katrina. Still, it has not been enough, and Esch wonders how much violence and how big a spectacle women must create in order to be valued—or at the very least acknowledged.



The air of desolation, abandonment, and flight palpable in the air and on the ground in Bois Sauvage portends just how awful and dangerous the approaching storm is going to be. Nature functions again and again as a way of foreshadowing the future throughout the novel, and the flight of birds and animals from the woods signifies that something serious is bearing down on the Batistes.



The intersection of poverty and survival is on display in this passage as Esch and Randall attempt to salvage goods and supplies from their wealthier neighbors, only to find that this storm has made survivalists out of everyone. There is no excess, no luxury, no breathing room where this storm is concerned, and everything has been stripped back and salvaged.



There is something omen-like about China dropping the chicken at Esch and Randall's feet; she has killed something for them, perhaps sensing their need, but they reject her offering. China has been positioned throughout the novel as a "goddess" to whom offerings—of food, attention, medicine, et cetera—are made; here, though, China is the one in supplication to her humans.



China is often depicted licking Skeetah with bloody lips. Ward invokes this image again and again to illustrate the violence inherent in femininity but especially in motherhood, and the ways in which nurturing and love are possible in spite of violent acts or behaviors. It also underscores Skeetah's intense devotion to China, compounded in this passage by his willingness to sleep outside with her in the middle of the worst storm in decades.



Daddy says that **Katrina** has been upgraded to a category five. He relents and says that China can stay in the bedroom, but mustn't run wild throughout the house. Randall is upset about having to sleep in the living room, as he refuses to stay in the room with China, but Esch comforts him by reminding him that during hurricanes they all usually camp out in the living room anyway.

Daddy asks Esch to make him some soup, but Randall says he'll take care of it. Esch and Skeetah stand together in the hallway, with **China** between them. She is wagging her tail and smiling. Skeetah tells Esch that "everything need[s] a chance."

Symbolically, it's possible that allowing China's motherly presence in the house is repugnant—or perhaps simply re-traumatizing—to the men of the Batiste family other than Skeetah.



For the entirety of the novel, Skeetah has been trying to give China and her puppies the "chance" they deserve to survive—now, at this crucial moment, he refuses to give up just because things are getting tougher and more dire.



THE ELEVENTH DAY: KATRINA

Esch remembers that when she was little and her mother first told her about hurricanes, she assumed animals fled before the storm. Now, though, she realizes that "maybe the small don't run;" maybe, they hunker down, stand together, and prepare for what's to come, just like Esch and her family have done.

Esch and her brothers have made pallets to sleep on in the living room, and they spend the night before the storm hits washing dishes, filling the bathtubs, and watching cartoons. Only Skeetah and Daddy stay in their rooms. Unable to sleep, Esch stays up reading her mythology book, moving past the **Medea** myth at last. She realizes, as she reads, that in all the Greek myths, water means death.

Esch remembers the worst storm she ever weathered in her lifetime. While Mama was still pregnant with Junior, a category three storm called Elaine hit. Esch knows, though, that **Katrina** is a category five, and will be much more destructive. She remembers that her mother talked to the storm the whole time it bore down on them; now, Esch wonders if she will be able to keep her baby safe if she talks to the storm and "spell[s] it harmless like Medea."

Though in the previous chapter Esch noticed that animals seemed to be fleeing, she decides now to see strength in staying and fighting to survive.



In ancient Greece, the sea was difficult to traverse and full of terrors, so water often represented death or at least serious danger for the gods and heroes of myth. Esch realizes now that water also represents that same threat to her family now—a threat as old as time.



Esch, like China, now has "something to protect;" she looks to her memories of her own mother, combined with her knowledge of Medea's powers and actions, for how to handle her mounting fear as the storm approaches.



In the morning, the sun will not come out. The wind outside sounds like a train. Skeetah comes into the living room for a lamp, then asks Esch to come with him back to his bedroom. In the room, the sound of the wind is even louder. **China** is on the bed, and the puppies are on the floor in a bucket. Esch and Skeetah reminisce about their mother. Skeetah asks Esch if she remembers the last thing their mother ever said to them; Esch admits she does not. Skeetah recalls that as Daddy loaded Mama into the truck to take her to the hospital, she called for Esch and Skeetah to look after one another. Skeetah tells Esch that she looks more and more like their mother the older she gets, and Esch doesn't know what to say.

Skeetah hears something outside. He goes to the window and listens, then identifies the noise as a dog barking. The heavy rain and the leaves of the trees smacking the roof and windows make it hard to hear, but the dog is barking loudly. Skeetah knows they can't go outside and call the dog in, but wishes they could. **China** begins to growl and bark herself, lifting her head towards the ceiling. Suddenly, there is a deafening noise elsewhere in the house; Esch and Skeetah run out to the hall to see Randall heading into Daddy's room, where a tree has fallen in and left a gaping hole in the ceiling. Daddy retrieves an envelope from his dresser and then ushers everyone out of his room to safety.

In the living room, Daddy predicts that the storm will be over in just a few hours. Esch marvels at how **China** seemed to know that something was about to happen to the ceiling before it caved in, but Skeetah denies that China knew anything. Skeetah brings China and the puppies into the living room, and China drapes herself across Skeetah's lap protectively.

A little while later, Randall notices that the floor is wet. Esch has been concentrating on her mythology book, rereading **Medea's** story. She looks down, and sees that the carpet beneath her is dark. Skeetah stands up and looks around; he states that water is coming up through the floorboards. Daddy and Randall assure him that couldn't happen, but Skeetah goes to the window and looks out; sure enough; there is a lake growing in the yard, heading right for the house. Within seconds, there is water over Esch's toes, and then her ankles. Junior squeals and points out the window—the water has picked up Daddy's truck and is carrying it through the yard.

Though Skeetah has adopted China as a kind of mother figure, Esch is still figuring out whom—or what—she should look to for inspiration, guidance, and comfort. To hear Skeetah say that Esch herself resembles their dead mother surprises and perhaps even excites her—she has been searching for surrogate mothers all this time without realizing that her own mother's voice and strength have been inside her all along.



China's seemingly clairvoyant—or at least intuitive—knowledge of the ceiling's impending destruction shows the connection she has to nature and to violence alike. This connection spooks everyone, but is nonetheless a marvel as Skeetah and the rest of his family confront the ways in which China's presence has saved—and will continue to save—all of their lives.



Skeetah doesn't want to imbue China with magical or mythical powers for some reason—and yet even as he denies her ability to protect them all, she positions herself protectively around Skeetah.



Just as Esch's book predicted, the threat of water soon encroaches upon her family. The storm surge comes on fast and furious, and the sight of the car floating like a boat throughout the yard signals just how violent, powerful, and indiscriminate the storm is—and is yet to become.



Daddy instructs Randall to open up the attic. Skeetah hands Esch the puppies' bucket so that he can help. Once the ladder has come down from the ceiling, everyone climbs up into the attic, and Skeetah pulls the attic door shut behind them. Up in the attic, beneath the thin roof, Esch and her brothers can hear every rush of wind and rain. It is dark, and no one can see anything. Within minutes, Skeetah realizes that the water is coming up into the attic. Skeetah gets up and begins banging at the ceiling, making a hole. Randall helps him, swinging a chain saw at the roof until it gives. Light floods the attic, and Randall climbs out into the "hungry maw" of the hurricane.

The wind and rain are terrible, but one by one the Batistes climb up onto the roof. Skeetah removes his jeans and makes a sling in which he can carry **China**, who shakes and trembles with fear. Up on the roof, Skeetah points to Mother Lizbeth and Papa Joseph's house—it is on a slight incline, and thus above the water line. Though the yard is flooded, Skeetah points out that they can climb the large oak tree which spreads like a "jungle gym" between the two houses, just above the rushing water. Daddy insists it's too dangerous, but Randall warns him they'll drown if they stay on the roof.

Randall, Skeetah, and Junior all jump down onto the tree, and then it is Esch's turn. She is hesitant, but Daddy urges her, and she leaps—burdened by the bucket full of puppies, she worries she won't make it over to the house. She struggles across the branches, with Daddy close behind her. Everyone follows Skeetah through the rushing water and debris. He shouts that he is going to swim up to the house and break a window, and asks Esch to come with him. Daddy accuses him of trying to save the puppies over everything else, but Skeetah shouts out that Esch is pregnant.

Esch knows that her father is able to see she is pregnant; her wet clothes stick to her, revealing her new curves and fullness. Esch struggles down into the water, and she slips and falls, dropping the puppies, who fly out of the bucket and into the water. Skeetah cries out as **China** struggles against him, scratching him. Esch reaches out and grabs a puppy—the brindle runt—but can't spot the other two anywhere. She tucks the puppy into her shirt. China jerks and writhes, getting out of Skeetah's sling and swimming after the lost puppies.

As the Batistes climb higher and higher into the belly of their house, Katrina chases them all the way out—she is almost personified in her relentless pursuit of them. Ward has set the storm up both practically through language and symbolically as a part of the triad of "mother" figures throughout the novel in order to illustrate how nature—despite being the most uncontrollable, impersonal force in the world—often feels pointedly destructive, as if it has a personal vendetta against its victims.



The Batistes, afraid of drowning in their own house, are determined to survive however possible—even if it means going deeper into the storm in order to get out of its way.



Skeetah's reveal of Esch's pregnancy shows both that he has known all along what is going on with her, and is desperate in this moment to make sure that she—and her baby—are saved. The life of her unborn child is more important to Skeetah than keeping his sister's secret. Whereas Esch has been trying to erase the child's presence the whole novel (to her own and possibly to its detriment), Skeetah now calls everything out into the open, ensuring that Esch is treated like a mother and given the special treatment needed to accommodate the new life inside of her.



As the puppies are carried away by the storm, China struggles away from her beloved owner and bounds into the unknown to rescue them in a stark reversal of the ending of the Medea myth. China wants to save her two remaining puppies, not kill them, and she is borne away into the water rather than the air.



Esch feels the water rise over her head—she is frightened, but the hiss of the water makes her feel as if the hurricane is trying to comfort her. She feels a hand wrap around her leg, and realizes that Skeetah is pulling her up and pushing her through the broken window. He calls for **China**, but she is gone. Randall and Junior haul themselves up into the house while Daddy swims lopsidedly, favoring his bad hand. Randall hoists Daddy up into the attic; Esch realizes that the puppy she has tucked into her shirt isn't moving, and has died. Skeetah calls out for China—Esch looks into the water and sees her swimming into the woods. Junior places his hands over his eyes, rocks back and forth, and wails “No” over and over and over again as the wind continues to howl.

THE TWELFTH DAY: ALIVE

Esch looks back on the final hours of the storm. She and her family sat huddled in the attic as the wind died down and the water receded inch by inch. Esch crawled over to Skeetah who was looking out the attic as if he wanted to jump—Esch touched his shoulder and his skin was hot, though the room and the air were both freezing. Skeetah said that he failed **China**. Esch told him he didn't, but he wouldn't hear otherwise. Esch pointed out that Skeetah did not fail their family. As Skeetah started to sob, Esch held him tight.

Skeetah proclaimed that when the water receded to a certain level—the middle of the tractor tires—he was going to go out and look for **China**. Sure enough, when the rubber became visible over the roiling water, Skeetah began squirming to leave, though Daddy insisted the storm wasn't over. Skeetah jumped from the attic and waded out through the yard through the waist-high water, turning to look back only once before disappearing into a maze of debris.

The water eventually receded all the way, leaving Daddy's ruined truck marooned atop the gas tank and the inside of the house wet, muddy, and in disarray. Randall pointed out that their family needed to get to shelter, especially with Daddy's hand having been exposed to bacteria in the floodwater. Randall assured Daddy that they could fix up the house before leading the family, barefoot, down the main road to Big Henry's house.

As true chaos descends on the Batistes, very nearly ripping them apart from one another forever, they are each traumatized in their own separate way. Skeetah's loss is arguably the greatest, just behind China's own terrible loss. Everyone's lives, though, have been forever changed by the day's events, and the storm is not even over yet.



Skeetah, having lost China, is utterly inconsolable. The fact that he saved his family seems not to matter at all; he can only focus on the fact that he has lost China, who was a mother, a sister, a daughter, and a goddess to him all at once. The Batistes' whole lives have been about survival, but now it becomes clear that to survive sometimes is even more painful than the alternative.



Skeetah's determination to set off after China at the earliest possible moment mirrors her earlier need to follow her puppies, no matter the cost—his squirming and jerking even recalls China's own desperate physical attempts to get away and pursue her young.



The Batistes have survived—but their home has just barely held on. Their grandparents' house, once merely a salvaging site, has become their refuge—however their many years of reaping from it have left it an inadequate shelter, and they must seek safety elsewhere.



When the Batistes arrived at Big Henry's house, they found it intact, despite missing a small part of its roof. Big Henry and Marquise had been just about to leave and search for the Batistes. Big Henry asked where Skeetah was, and Esch explained he'd gone looking for **China**, who'd washed away. In the crowd gathered at Big Henry's, Esch locked eyes with Manny—when Randall saw, he asked her if Manny was her baby's father, and she nodded. Randall announced he'd beat the shit out of Manny, but Esch answered that there was no need; she'd already taken care of it. Big Henry's mother helped Daddy settle on the sofa and fixed everyone up with sandwiches, while Marquise left with his dog, Lala, to look for Skeetah, only to return emptyhanded. Skeetah would not leave the Pit, and wanted to wait for China's return.

Now, the sun has emerged and burned away the lingering storm clouds. Big Henry and one of his uncles discuss the damage throughout the town, which has rendered whole roads and bridges completely impassible. Daddy asks Esch if what Skeetah said during the storm was true, and Esch nods. Daddy apologizes for pushing her, and asks how long she's been with child. Esch admits she doesn't know. Daddy tells her that as soon as they can they'll get her to a doctor to make sure that everything is okay with the baby. Esch wonders if her father can feel the phantom pain of his missing fingers the way she feels the phantom pain of her dead mother. She decides in that moment that if her child is a girl, she will name it Rose, after Mama.

Big Henry walks over to Esch and asks if she, Randall, and Junior want to take a car ride through the neighborhood to see the damage. Esch agrees, and suggests they go collect Skeetah on the way back. Daddy predicts that Skeetah won't leave the Pit. He grips his bad hand and complains that it's ailing him. Big Henry promises they'll find him some medicine. Esch decides that if her child is a boy, she will name it after Skeetah—the baby will be called Jason.

As the Batistes seek shelter at Big Henry's house, real life comes flooding back in. They have survived the storm, but the problems they had to face before it hit remain waiting for them; namely, Esch's uncomfortable situation with Manny, and the fact that she must deal with her family's new knowledge of her pregnancy.



Daddy has been something of an antagonist throughout the novel, his constant warnings about the storm and his drunken stumblings a source of anxiety and frustration for Esch and her siblings. Now, however, Daddy displays compassion, empathy, and understanding as he discusses Esch's pregnancy with her; she realizes that her father is missing just as much, if not more than she herself is, and that the pain they each feel is twinned and entwined.



The reveal that Skeetah has, all along, been a nickname for Jason demonstrates part of the reason why Esch felt such an attachment to the story of Medea—the parallels between the myth and her own life are reinforced, and readers can better see how the mythic figures in the tale reminded Esch of the real-life figures in her own world.



Big Henry drives through town on the sodden bayou road. Trees everywhere have been ripped down, and Esch is shocked by how much sky she can see. On the main road through the neighboring town, St. Catherine, the high school is flooded and the elementary school is “flat as a pancake.” Most power lines are down, and eighteen-wheeler trucks have been overturned in a parking lot nearby. As the group passes the elementary school gym—or what used to be the gym—Esch remembers the drama that unfolded there just a few days ago. There is a house sitting in the middle of the train tracks, and, nearer to the beach, all of the houses and buildings have been flattened to piles of wood. The fancy old homes that once made Esch and her family “feel small and dirty and poorer than ever” are completely gone—they have not even been reduced to rubble, but have simply been swept away.

As the group makes their way back down the ravaged road, they come upon the ruins of a local liquor store. Randall suggests they get some bottles for Daddy, and they all get down on hands and knees to grab whatever is still intact. Esch picks through the glass and gathers up some shards, slipping the prettiest ones into her pocket. Big Henry squats down next to Esch, and admits that he overheard Esch talking to Daddy about her pregnancy back at the house. He asks who the daddy is, and Esch replies mutely that the baby has no daddy. Big Henry replies that Esch is wrong; her baby has “plenty daddies.” Esch is moved and begins crying. Big Henry tells her that she can always count on him, and Esch is overcome with love and gratitude for Big Henry.

Esch decides that she will tie the pieces of glass she’s salvaged together with string and hang the jagged shards above her bed so that they tell the story of **Katrina**, “the mother that swept into the Gulf and slaughtered.” She wants to remember “the murderous mother who cut [her and her family] to the bone but left [them] alive,” and taught them how to crawl and salvage.

Back at the Pit, Skeetah has made a clearing in what “used to be” the yard but is now a mess of trees, branches, wood, and garbage. The house is slathered in mud and tilted to the side. Skeetah sits on an overturned bucket before a fire he has built. Next to him is a pile of **China**’s things.

Katrina has all but completely destroyed the town of St. Catherine, leaving uncanny ruins and utter devastation in her wake. There is something Grecian about the image of Esch picking through a series of ruins—feeling both a sense of profound sadness and a strange superiority at seeing the institutions which once made her feel small and oppressed now leveled to the ground.



In a moving reversal of Esch’s despairing claim that her child will have no father, Big Henry declares that Esch’s baby will in fact be surrounded by fathers. Though Esch and her siblings have felt profoundly the lack of motherly influences on their lives, Esch’s child will have a mother—and the benefit of several loving paternal figures to boot. There is something mythic about the idea of a child surrounded by such a plethora of “daddies”—Esch’s life continues to mirror myth, even as the myths she held dear have come crashing down around her.



Though Katrina took from Esch, ravaged her home, destroyed her town, and resulted in unimaginable loss, Esch recognizes the violently maternal nature in such a cataclysmic event; though the storm has robbed her community of so much, it will also teach them to rebuild.



In this passage, it looks as if Skeetah has constructed an altar at which he is worshipping in hopes of bringing China back. The fire and her piled things are reminiscent of Greek sites of worship and prayer.



Randall asks Skeetah to come back to Big Henry's with them—they are all worried about him. Skeetah shakes his head, though, and insists he's not going anywhere; he knows **China** is still out there somewhere. Big Henry suggests Skeetah come back for the night and return to the Pit during the day to wait. Even if China comes back and finds the house abandoned, she will not leave again. Skeetah insists there is no "if," and rubs his head. Esch thinks he looks like he could easily shed his human shape and emerge as a "great gleaming pit, black to China's white."

Skeetah assures the others that **China** will come back to him. Esch enters her imagination and predicts that she, her siblings, and Big Henry will sit with Skeetah until they fall asleep, one by one, while Skeetah feeds the fire and listens for any sound of China. Esch predicts that China will return standing up tall and straight with "the milk burned out of her," knowing that Esch has kept watch for her. She will call Esch sister, Esch hopes—she will know that Esch, too, is a mother.

Skeetah's strange, intense relationship with China throughout the novel culminates in this passage as his faith in her return holds steady even in the face of his friends' and siblings' doubts. Esch sees another dimension to her brother—quite literally—in this passage as she recognizes the savage protectiveness in him, and the animalistic commitment to survival he has.



In the novel's final moments—simultaneously their most hopeful and hopeless—Esch retreats again into her imagination and constructs a mythic, epic return for China. In this vision, China at last recognizes her as an equal—Esch has embraced her role as a mother, and all of the violence and strife that will accompany it, and seems to long to worship at China's altar just like Skeetah so that she can learn from a truly devoted mother figure at last.





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