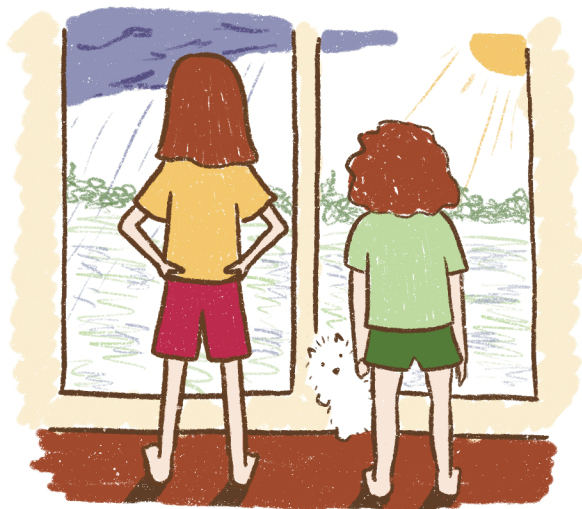


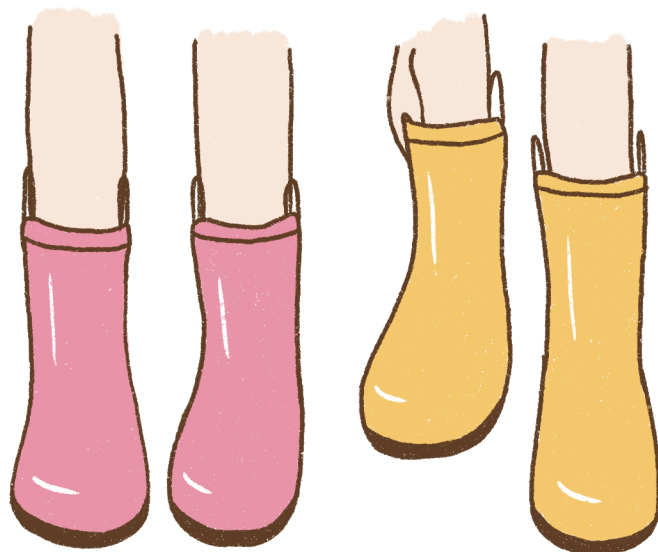
The AFTERMATH



After the hurricane had barreled across the landscape like a pack of howling coyotes, and the clouds no longer hung thick and low like their matted underbellies, and we could go outside without the wind carrying us off and the rain slamming us down again . . .

. . . my big sister and I would put on our rubber boots and head out to the woods to see the aftermath.

It was always a bit suspenseful, walking across the soggy pasture to find out what had survived.



Every year, the summer squalls took more trees away. Every year, the patches of sky between the branches grew larger and larger. Even from a distance, we could already see that the skyline was different, ragged, as if someone had tried to cut it out holding the scissors in the wrong hand.

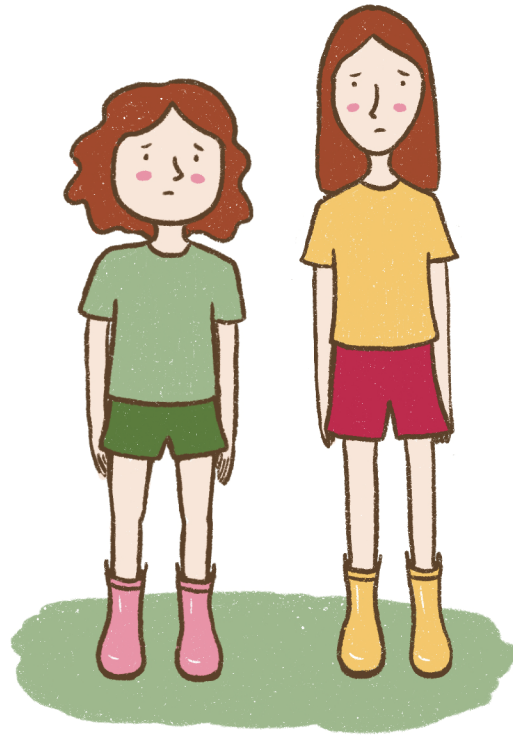
We stopped at the edge of the tattered canopy. We didn't have a choice; the sinkholes were completely flooded, making old paths impassable.



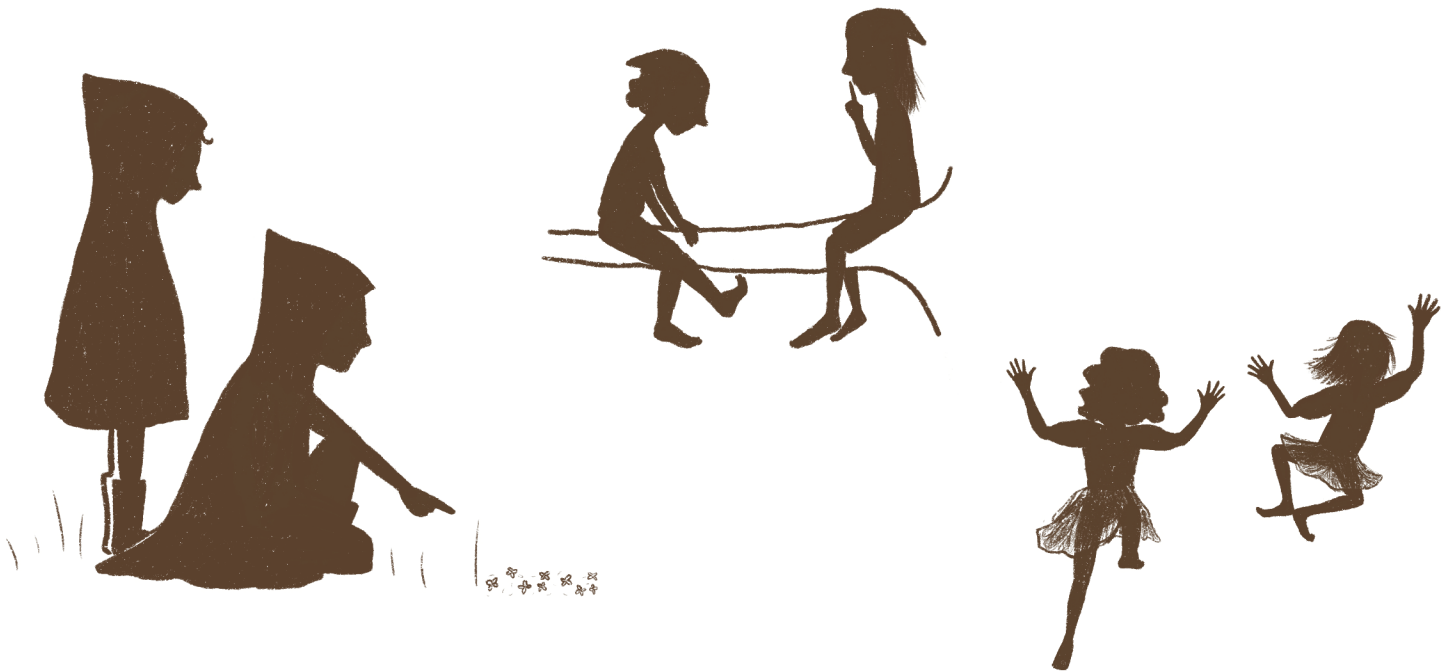
Everything was raw and exposed.

Branches were stripped bare of their mossy beards, which floated in little islands on the surface of the water. Longleaf pines had been flayed open, their orange hearts rich with the spicy smell of turpentine. Laurel oaks leaned against their neighbors, with great scraggles of dirt and roots ripped up at their feet.

The storm had made the familiar unfamiliar to us,
and it was hard not to feel a sense of loss.



For my sister and I, this forest was the homeland of our imaginations. This was where we searched for fairies and played hide-and-seek up in the trees and sang made-up songs at the top of our lungs, and it was dwindling with each passing year.



We were standing amid the ruins of a fallen kingdom.

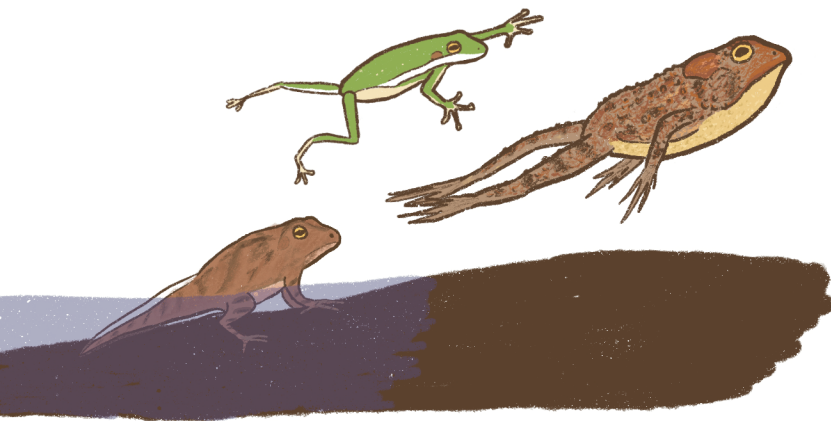
And yet we also knew that, in time, new things would rise from the rubble.

We would find new corners of the woods for our imaginations to bloom, encouraged to grow in new directions by the caprices of wind and rain.



The water would drain away.

The tadpoles would swim up onto the banks, transform, and raise their voices in a great buzzing celebration of their new life on land.



The moldering branches would crumple into the earth.



And the acorns and other seeds would lie patiently in the good rich soil, waiting for the next rain to come.