More Than Anything Else
story by Marie Bradby - pictures by Chris K. Soentpict
Before light—while the stars still twinkle—Papa, my brother John, and I leave our cabin and take the main road out of town, headed to work.

The road hugs the ridge between the Kanawha river and the mountain. We travel it by lantern. My stomach rumbles, but we had no morning meal, but it isn't really a meal I want, though I would not turn one down.
More than anything else, I want to learn to read.
But for now, I must work. From sunup to sundown,
we pack salt in barrels at the saltworks.
A white mountain of salt rises above Papa’s head. All day long we shovel it, but it refuses to grow smaller.

We stop only to grab a bite—sweet potatoes and corn cakes that Papa has brought along in his coat pocket. As I eat every crumb of my meal, I stare at the white mountain. Salt is heavy and rough. The shiny white crystals burn on your hands, your arms, your legs, the soles of your feet.
I see a man reading a newspaper aloud and all their faces move.
I have found hope, and it is as known as me.

I see myself the man, and as I watch his eyes move across the paper, it is as if I knew what the black marks mean, as if I am reading. As if everyone is listening to me. And I held those thoughts in my hands.
I will work until I am the best reader in the county. Children will crowd around me, and I will teach them to read.

But Papa taps me on the shoulder. "Come on." And John tugs at my shirt. They don't see what I see. They don't see what I can be.
We hurry home. "Mama, I have to learn to read," I say. She holds my hand and feels my hungry face as my heart.
It is a small book—a blue the color of midnight. She gives it to me one evening in the corner of our cabin, pulling it from under the clothes that she washes and irons to make a little money.

She doesn't say where she got it. She can't read it herself, but she knows this is something called the alphabet. She thinks it is a songy kind of thing. A song on paper.
After work, even though our shoulders still ache and our legs are stained with salt, I study my book. I listen at the window and try to imagine their song.
I draw the marks on the dirt floor and try to figure out what sounds they make, what story their picture tells.

But sometimes I feel I am trying to jump without legs. And my thoughts get slippery, and I can't keep up with what I want to be, and how good I will feel when I learn this magic, and how people will look up to me.

I can't catch the tune of what I see. I get a salt-shovelling pain and feel my dreams are slipping away.

I have got to find him—that newspaper man.
I look everywhere.
Finally, I find that brown face of hope.
He tells me the song—the sounds the marks make.

I jump up and down singing it. I shout and laugh like when I
was baptized in the creek. I have jumped into another world and
I am saved.
But I have to know more. “Tell me more,” I say.
“What’s your name?” he asks.
“Booker,” I say.
And he takes the sound of my name and draws it on the ground.
I linger over that picture. I know I can hold it forever.
Realizing His “Possible Self”

Self Determination, Resilience and Cooperative Economics

Tuskegee Institute is now called Tuskegee University. Students from many backgrounds go to school there. People remember Booker T. Washington as the school’s founder and as a great leader.

This monument to Booker was built in 1922 on the Tuskegee school grounds. The monument honors Booker for helping others see the importance of education.

Booker’s ideas became part of an important debate about rights and education. Some people disagreed with Booker. They said blacks and whites should always be treated equally.

But Booker believed blacks had to first learn skills and trades. He wanted blacks to buy their own land and run their own businesses. Then blacks would earn respect and fair treatment.