

Loren Graham

Sleepwalking

How far I'd walked and why, I'd never know,
but I could rise and dress and venture out
onto the moonlit farm, to distant fields,
wearing my coat if it were cold, all while
I was asleep.

Deep in a vivid dream
of another nearby place, I'd wake and feel
that I had been ghosted away, transported:
loafing on the porch while Dad played guitar
or watching while Mom laid the supper table,
I'd suddenly find myself among the boulders
beside the dark creek, puzzled as to what
I could be doing there, far from my bed
while heat lightning flashed against the midnight sky.
In a mere instant I could go from walking
a certain cow path in full noontime sun
to stumbling off that same path in the pitch
dark, dead broom grass crunching underfoot.
It was as if I'd merged with those broad pastures
and ponds and scrubby copses so completely
that even parts I never looked upon
became as much a part of me as those
I saw by day.

All unaware of dangers
and dumb to pleasures I was passing by,
I found myself in places I was dreaming.

Old Snowball

I wasn't supposed to get out of Old Snowball,
our battered white pickup. But Dad had seen
a friend and gone to jaw, so when the first
few shovelfuls of coal had clattered down
in Snowballs' bed behind me, I climbed out.

A black man had the shovel: he was old,
bent down as though the coal had warped his back
somehow. His overalls and shirt were dark,
his thick work gloves filthy, coated with grime.

I knew that I was not allowed to talk
to him, so I just stood and watched him work.
He jabbed the shovel into the glittering pile,
levering coal into the truck: dust flew
around us for a bit, and then he dropped
the shovel on the pile, pulled off his gloves,
and rested his hands on the tailgate top.
They were not black, those hands. I thought they looked
like chocolate milk, and not at all like coal.

I knew that I would probably get in trouble
for getting dirty, but I made a mark
in the grime on that truck, a line that showed
the white of Old Snowball, the black shards in its bed,
the man's hands in between, my hands like chips
or bread, the little dust spots settling over it all.

Story Time Girl

City-County Public Library

Of course I loved her miniskirt and bob-cut and the tinge of effervescent green that flashed each time she blinked—how could I not when she was so grown up, but with a sheen coming from every part of her? No girl I'd ever seen had dressed like her, had hair or eyes like her, or seemed—like her—from a world so distant from mine. I knew not to stare, but I did it anyway.

Yet what I saw was nothing to compare with what I heard: she told the red death and the yellow wallpaper and the great jumping frog, each word sharp and dangerous, each one with a glint as sure and momentary as the hint

of shimmer on her lids. I couldn't take my ears off her: she was like a library within the library—the place I prized most, where every adult I knew advised me that my future lay. A solitary book, all of them said, would be the book that left my way distinct and undisguised and cleared a path for me and swept it clean. I felt it coming toward me from those green-hazed eyes.

The Day of the Swarm

the bees swirled down all around me in long buzzing ropes

from under one of the many warped siding pieces

on our house that were forever loosening, slipping,
struggling against the persevering facts of weather

and gravity, against the tendency of this life
to lower, bees everywhere spiraling to a point
on the trunk of the sapling I had been playing by

where a ball of bees my size now hung as if waiting
for the bee man who had come to take them to a new
home. *Don't fidget, he told me. You just have to be brave,
and let them crawl all over you, because if you're still
and don't touch or swat them, they'll like you and not sting you,*

and I told him I would stay brave, and somehow he caught
the queen and put her in the big white box he had brought
and set beneath the tree. He tapped the trunk and all
that great wad of bees fell straight down together like one
creature into the box, and when they had settled down,
he put the lid on, and I felt the ones on my arms
and the back of my neck begin to whirr and leave me
for the hole in the end of their new house, their new white

perfect house the beekeeper would soon load in his truck.
And something was there, hovering behind the bee man,
behind the sapling, the bees mumbling inside their hive.
The measure of a life, no matter the circumstance.
Its constant, incremental decay. Its sweet despite.

The Time I Didn't Drown

In the middle of ice, I heard the sharp crack
and saw the long fissure streak its silver beneath me,
and I hung there over the farm pond and held my breath.

Would my family find me locked in place that evening,
my blue hood frozen in the pose it had struck
when I stopped struggling? And would it fracture something

in them that I was dead, the boy they all expected
to break out of the life they lived in that place,
the one who might have shown it was *possible* to leave,

even for the ones who stayed?

I slid forward gingerly,
not lifting my feet, and slipped off that mirrored surface,
and took a path dark with frozen mud and manure,

rutted with the hoof prints of the landlord's Holsteins,
and walked it past the barn in the blue winter twilight:
past Old Babe, our Guernsey cow, waiting

at the gate to be milked, impatient as always,
past where the chimney boiled black on the house top
from the front room coal stove that kept us warm,

Dad and some cousins probably talking over the TV,
punctuating their arguments by poking at the fire,
Mom and Grandma silent, starting cornbread and potatoes

in the kitchen, while a big pot of beans simmered on—
our supper, as always.

But I hadn't fallen through.
So far I hadn't slipped or fallen through.