

William Thompson

## Recommended Reading

*Places I was Dreaming*, by Loren Graham (CavanKerry \$16.00)

Since the publication of *Mose* in 1994, Loren Graham has been one of my favorite poets. His poems have a way of drawing one in completely—I read *Mose* twice in one sitting—because of Graham’s mastery of narrative and his amazing talent for creating authentic voices. After *Mose*, a book-length poem about a black inmate in a Texas penitentiary, came *The Ring Scar* (2010), the chronicle of a marriage’s inexorable dissolution, written in alternating sonnets (spoken by the husband) and free verse poems (spoken by the wife). Now, in *Places I was Dreaming*, Graham turns his attention to his own upbringing on the outskirts of a small Oklahoma town. Graham grew up in poverty, which forced him to come to terms not only with his own uncertain condition but also with how it was perceived by middle class children:

*Are you guys hillbillies?*

His voice was soft and serious, and I knew he was trying  
to find a place to put me, to think of a name  
that would fit me somehow. And I knew

that a name was a verdict and a kind of sentence,  
that even for Lionel *hillbilly* would make my high-hoping  
and sober father into a drunk, bearded and quick

to his gun, and my pretty mother into a toothless

horror, all of us into things vicious, lazy,  
and filthy, and would fix us that way forever

in his mind. So I said *No. We just don't have much money.*  
Then I pulled up my sleeves and held out my bare arms.

*Look,*  
*though, look! I'm every bit as clean as you, not dirty at all.*

In all of these poems, even in the many humorous ones, we sense an unflagging determination to vindicate the family name, to find some way out of desperate circumstances. The family's only option was to give the son the best possible education. In one poem, Graham recalls his father's offer to buy his 7-year-old boy a set of *Collier's Encyclopedia*, even though the father would have to finance it by overhauling and selling a dilapidated car, even though the son knew

what my *yessir* meant to everyone present:  
another month of beans, less coal for the fire,  
my father's spending his winter evenings with a drop  
light  
in the unheated barn he used for a garage—  
the real price of privilege, its great black bulk.

But that *yessir* also meant the beginning of the boy's fascination with words and stories, the early stirrings of the poetic impulse that, in times of solitude, would reveal itself when "a strange little tune made itself in my mind / and spilled out whispered on my lips."

It was, of course, that same maturing impulse that eventually produced the poems in this touching, courageous, and beautifully written book. Here, in its entirety, is one I particularly admire:

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Small Child Walking on Great Aunts and Uncles

They lined up like foothills on our flowered divan,  
the great ones, overflowing the kitchen chairs and  
    footstools  
that continued in a circle across the front room  
    linoleum,  
and I climbed up to travel the uneven track of their  
    laps.

I trod on the scruffy ones, the gap toothed, the  
    jowly.  
The oblong of bosom who smelled of talcum and  
    coffee.  
Those who laughed themselves red in the face.  
I walked across the paunchy and the ones with  
    unruly hair.  
The warty. The blemished. The slope-shouldered  
    and dewlapped.  
Those whose breath came out in little gasps.

I traversed shaky lipstick and eyebrows drawn on in  
    pencil,  
the bald, bespectacled, chinless,  
those with an air of motor oil and fish bait,  
with huge meaty hands and over-inflated fingers,  
those who scraped under their nails with knife  
    blades.  
The ones who laughed hard in odd wheezes and  
    grunts.  
The ones who laughed merely by shaking.

Mine was a road of scratchers and noddors,  
a pathway of great jiggling elbows,  
of the stubby, of the widows-peaked, of gaping  
    black nostrils,

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a fleshy track suffused with tobacco and bacon  
grease.

These were the ground I walked on, mine underfoot,  
and though dead are still mine and will persist as  
mine though I become ground with them, though  
I be dust.

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