

Loren Graham

Country Boy

Why did I cringe at the unvarnished shock
in the voice of the first boy to look down from the bus
at my family's falling-down wreck of a farm
off the dirt road behind his nice subdivision?

He stared at me, unbelieving: "You *LIVE* there?"
How had I missed it before then, the heft
such speech could bear?

And how did I answer
in the hearing of his friends and still feel surprise

the following morning when all of them were waiting
with their new club of words? *Cracker boy. Cornbread.*
Tax stealer. And how, of all catcalls, did the mildest
and truest enrage me the most: *country boy?*

Country boy: their leader chanted it, dropping
his tongue to the floor of his mouth to mock
my accent and make it obscene, *cuntra boa,*
cuntra boa, until I learned that words could make *me*

obscene, till I calculated daily whether I had the strength,
if I caught him off guard, to slam his face
into the metal bar on the back of the bus seat,
to pay him for those weights, those words that were my fall.

Octobers

Dad would lug the big coal stove in
off the porch where it had rusted all summer and fit
the pipe to the hole in the chimney—covered
until now with a pie pan—and bring in the coal box;
and with the front room smaller, I could see ahead
how that one warm room would draw us all to it,

always somebody stabbing at the fire with the long
crowbar we used for a poker, someone
working the grate back and forth, adding to the din
getting rid of the clinkers or tumbling fresh coal
into the flames, banging down the iron lid, always
everyone talking in that one warm place

with the TV going and nobody watching it,
somebody singing with a guitar, one of the aunts
telling a big story to the others leaning in
(*and I want you to know . . . she'd say and I'll be
jiggered if he didn't . . .*), while Grandma cracked
pecans with a tack hammer and the cousins argued—

whose hound, whose car—my younger sister
riding her trike in slow circles across the linoleum,
uncles laughing at her, smoking pipes or rolling
their own, opening the stove with one
smooth motion to toss a spent match or butt
so quick its warm breath was all I noticed.

Letters

He kept it under the divan where it couldn't
get stepped on, chalk and eraser
on top of it: little blackboard

framed in pale pine, slate
on which I fashioned my first crude
letters, his huge hand closing

over mine to help me form them,
to learn the order of things—"A" first,
the upstroke, the downstroke, the cross again

and again until I could generate
a rough lopsided capital on my own
and on through "Z," through zero

through nine—months passing as we framed
daily the strange awkward marks
whose insistent, eccentric gravity

I could feel but not account for, impossible
fascination of what chalk created,
eraser destroyed, both

by erosion, both in the single
clasp of that double hand
in that little clutch of moments left to him

before a final stroke closed in and left me
without him, with only these odd characters,
these letters, this way.