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Because Frank Fell Down

When my dad's house caught fire last year
much of my childhood was destroyed: picture
albums and yearbooks, report cards, that
award certificate from 6th grade celebrating
my first place finish in the 50 yard dash,
and an old tape recording of Neil Armstrong's
first words on the moon.

Much was lost, but my brother salvaged a few
pictures, most taken at my grandpa's farm
in Burkeville, Virginia, revealing the red-brick house
built after the Civil War, a place I've dreamed so often
now the back drop for a black and white picture
of my mom holding me when I was a baby
as a goat walks by in the background.

My mom was so beautiful then, with her
dark black hair and shy smile. I look
at her eyes and see how much she loved me.
Picture after picture, these tiny testaments
to a perfect love so long ago when a mid-
20th century sun lit the tobacco fields
and there were still hundreds of acres
of oak and pine covering those Nottoway
County hills. In the late sixties
the land was logged, reduced
to a moonscape. My grandpa's love
of booze accelerated and he coasted
downhill past the grim markers on the road
to alcoholism, smiling the entire way.

I look at pictures and find what was once real.
I look at pictures and see the tangible: love
and barns, the windmill, the rusty pump
that summoned iron-tinted water from

the well, from the Virginia underground
where old gods stirred and stuttered
each evening when the sun left us
alone in the starry darkness of a world
without lights where it did seem as if
God and heaven were close, and that the moon
was closer still, something I could almost
touch before I crawled beneath my grandma's
quilts and dreamed of love and the moon,
of a righteous God protecting us
from any earthly harm.

I have to add that I only won that fifty-yard dash
in sixth grade because a kid named Frank, who
was faster than me, slipped at the starting line.
And, by the way, the goat in the background of the picture
with my mom was white with black spots and like
all goats it was a mean son of a bitch.

It Spoke Something Beautiful

My grandfather drank too much
and broke the kitchen chairs on Saturday
nights when we hid upstairs
in that dark bedroom I'm always
returning to in dream with its
homemade quilts folded over two lumpy beds,
one for Mom and the other for the three
of us kids shivering beneath our heaven-bound breath.

All these years later, have I dreamed
details into the setting, added a mirror
in the corner of the room, where right
now my mom is brushing her long
black hair? Are the mud daubers real?
Spitting nests into the corners of high windows
that look out over the night fields
where the whippoorwills stir on the forest
floor, wailing into the night, truth telling
the sorrows of the world in every song?

Was the blacksnake real, the one that forced
itself through a gap in the sheet metal-covered fireplace
and poured itself out into the early morning darkness?
Did I really awaken to my mother's screams,
to the flickering tongue that spoke something
beautiful until my grandpa showed up with
his twelve gauge and transformed
the living creature into a bloody rope?

How Each Body is a World

I dreamed I was running
through a bright Florida morning
in lingerie, which was quite disturbing
because the panties didn't fit and
rubbed against my thighs
like some kind of meaning summoned from friction,
from the almost combustion of fabric on skin.

These lines are a fiction. I didn't really dream
this. I was actually looking at a poem title
that had the words *morning*,
running, *lingering*, and half asleep at my desk
lingering seemed better as lingerie.

Because lingering is kind of a creepy word,
close friend of malinger, brother of malignant,
the kind of syllables that always malign
the notion our lives have meaning,
that the friction between what we intend
and what spills out on the page
will one day blaze into speaking
a fire, a landscape,

or a child's toy--broken, abandoned,
malinger in a dusty closet
amid the ghosts of old clothes,
some of them underwear, a few of them
intimate, still carrying the scent
of romance on nights when the flesh
tingled and blood thrashed through arterial
rivers looking for places where
a woman's hips stretched into a canyon with walls
like jagged lines from Neruda, who saw
how each body is a world, and within
each world is an entire planet filled
with strange species and four hundred

kinds of butterflies that brighten the hours
of beautiful spaces even as they pollinate
plants and bring a morning of flowers,
of stems, of petals, of glory.