

Baltimore



We were living in Baltimore in August of 1945 when Little Boy and Fat Man immolated themselves over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I was afraid without understanding why, imagining perhaps that the fire still burned and that we too would be consumed.

In April of that year, when Roosevelt died, I ran around the house. Until the night 12 years later in the brush near Jupiter Beach when I was chased by a band of marauding lower classmen and managed to escape by jumping a drainage canal, it was the best running I ever did. I was without substance, weightless.

There was also the fight. I stood in a small clearing, surrounded by a thicket of vines and briars. A boy stood in front of me. I don't know who was bigger, him or me, or if it was a pairing of equals. Other boys were gathered in a circle around us. They were silent, waiting. I hit the boy in the face. The shock traveled like adrenaline up my arm, into my soul. He went down at my feet. The other boys roared.

There was the gun. My father and I went with a man in his car to a gun store outside of Baltimore. Another man took a pistol, maybe a small revolver, from a glass case and let me hold it. I can still feel the weight.

And there was the other thing. When my sister was one or two years old, big enough to walk around, I slammed the bedroom door on her finger. I suppose it was an accident, but my mother screamed and beat me as if I had done it on purpose. I don't remember the actual event, just her face.

Fifty years later, there were the dreams that I jotted down the next morning as crude little poems...

*My companion and I crawled under a house
exposing a shallow grave
from which proclaimed
a small outstretched hand.
It was not our doing
but we still were filled with shame and dread
worried that we too had secrets
waiting to be uncovered.*

*We visited a college where I wandered for a while
with an older woman
telling her how it was
when I was here
and how much had changed
not getting across
the extent of my confusion.*

*Then, I asked a scientist where the classrooms were.
As if expecting our arrival
he took us in his large old car
across the school
through a gate
into a field of industrial achievements
poised, artfully,
like spacecraft
or oil wells
arriving finally at a house,
reminding me of 1945.*

*We walked to the back,
where
in a dining room
also reminiscent of that era
the scientist held a blood-red
retarded baby
and warned,
“Do not look.”*

*His son ,
the baby’s father said,
“It’s not so bad.”
and left.*

*I thought so too
until I saw the baby boy’s misshapen mouth.*

*Evidently angry at his affliction
the scientist shook the boy a little
and said, “We must not tell.”*

*In clear language
the child replied,
“We must not tell.”*