

Dawn Leas

Gold Wake Press, 2008

Edge

Another School, 1982

I.

On display, like storefront mannequins
my sister and I stand together
in the convent basement, a makeshift
sixth-grade classroom. The other
students, family roots reaching
as deep as the coal mines, close ranks.

II.

The teacher introduces us, asks
polite questions about Texas.
We answer with hybrid accents.
The boys stare, the girls smirk,
heads turning to whisper.

III.

We are the new kids again, stiff
uniforms scratching bare legs,
loafers that need breaking in,
we keep our eyes on the worn linoleum.

Café du Monde

After a humid morning walking
the French Quarter, we sink into black
metal chairs under a canopy at Café du Monde.

My sister and I chase warm beignets
with milk cold as snow while our parents
sip chicory coffee bitter like a late-night argument. Popping

the last bites into our mouths, we want
to take a riverboat cruise, walk Bourbon Street,
shop in the French Market, ride home in a trolley car along

St. Charles Avenue. Dad leans back, blowing
smoke rings. *Slow down, there's plenty of time.* Mom
crosses her arms, then stares into her cup, dark and bottomless.

Ashes

My father was a volcano
spewing lava that night,
tables became timber --
curtains fell, walls crumbled.

My mother was a hummingbird
darting between him and us
wings humming false promises
that evaporated in the heat.

In the next room, my sister and I shared
a double bed like we had shared
our mother's womb, a tangle of legs
and arms, her thumping heart close to mine.
A sliver of light sliced our room
as Mother appeared, then disappeared again.

I folded my arms and blinked
like "I Dream of Jeannie."

In the morning, we tiptoed over rocky
landscape, washed our hands in ashes.
We waited.

Mississippi

Arms pumping,
we beat
everyone to
the wooden
steps, grab
the rope railing
tight, peel
off sneakers,
sweaty socks,
dip tired
feet in the
Mississippi.

The Natchez cruises slowly
by, red paddlewheel
throwing muddied plumes.
Its long wake lapping
at our ankles,

we are baptized
in the brown tide
that takes us further
from home.

Texas Heat

Every Saturday, old ranchers
line the soda fountain counter,
swivel on stools then bend
their Stetsons over steaming bowls

of chili. They wash away
the sting of cayenne pepper
with gulps of vanilla milkshakes,
heavy and cold like a snow Denton

never sees. Chugging straight
from stainless cups, they slam
them back on the countertop
rivulets of milk dripping from lip

to speckled Formica. Wiping their
mouths with the backs of coarse
hands, they tip their hats
to the waitress for more.