

Islands of Peace

Summer's first day, before
if the sun were hot enough,
someone would think of water.
We'd run to search in cupboards
for our old swimming trunks,
roll them in towels
and make our way upriver.
We'd pass the thinning houses
at the edge of town,
pass Pulman's cautious house
behind its wall, his raging
mastiff choking in its snarls.
Two fifty-six pound weights
dragged after him, slowed him.
Old Pulman came out sometimes,
calling his nervous threats,
easing his beast to calm,
wiping the white froth
with his hands
from the dog's jowls.

But we would be long gone,
aimed for a green elbow
of the river, below the bridge,
where quiet water lingered.

In April once, early sun
deceiving us, we found
three taller boys,
hooting with brisk chill,
already in our pool,
calling us to join them.
They could all swim,
floated downstream,
churned water, struck
across the current.

But the tireless river
throughout its seasons
had filed a narrow channel,
deep, carrying hidden water.
It kept us splashing near the bank,
timid on shallow pebbles.

Boysie Wild carried me across,
my small weight almost sinking him.
But he swam on, head lifted,
gasping, keeping his breath dry.
He set me in another country,
waist deep in a strange river,
on the far side of danger.
Little waves floated me,
bumped me, inch by inch,
on the stone ledge. I watched
my legs hang pale
in deepest water. Later,
grown cold, I pushed
away, thrashed with my arms
above imagined fathoms,
crawled safely out. The kind
of useless daring I was good at.

That was the day Reg Smith,
knowing that Channel swimmers
cover themselves with grease
to still the cold,
brought half a pound of lard
to keep his white skin warm.
And in he stepped, laid his plumpness
in the clean river. At once
the fat slid off, spreading
in frailest rainbows, fled
in films until the broken shallows
took them.

Walking home,
glowing, we were fulfilled.

It was a known world then.
We lived in it, we made it
with our voices. Somewhere,
though we did not know where,
there would be islands
in which the temperate sun
allowed for daylong swimming.
In a world like ours
perfect things were probable.
The islands of peace, of course.
We all believed in them.

Meanwhile we walked a world
sound to its very core.
Who could have known
its crust so thin that men
would burn it dry, shatter it?
We could not imagine
our days would be counted.

In Africa Reg Smith, only child
of old parents, his body
wrapped in khaki, burned away
and vanished in his smoke.
With many others, appalled,
confused, all certainty gone.
They did not find the islands.

I have not found the islands
of the blest, islands of peace;
but would believe in them,
would search for them, would
keep them floating
with my breath.

—Leslie Norris