

peace valley elementary school during the vietnam war

I could've been anyone

the three black kids in the whole school at the time
whom no one else played with at recess—

the girl so embarrassed to exist
her eyes slid sideways whenever you talked to her,
or the pretty blonde who liked the smart boys
and who could afford to sympathize with anyone—

the one who smiled equally at us all,
the janitor married to the 4th grade teacher
in bad plaid dresses, greasy gray hair,
a stooping gait and a bulldozer face—

the 5th grade teacher who loved reading
after-recess stories to us,
stroking our damp heads on wood desktops,
her voice smooth like her fingers,
her book a lantern held slightly before her—

the tall oaks hemming the field
that whistled and hissed shrill in the hurricane—

the mouse that bit the boy at Show and Tell
triggering so much rage he yelled, "*You bastard!*"
then ran outside, his clenched-white fist
flinging it to the asphalt—

the big white splash the mouse made
in the frothing thundershower
stunning everyone—

or that boy's friend who raced right after him
half to stop the killing and half just to get soaked!

or the Texan we teased for being short:
"Ah thought evrathing frum Texuz wuz BIG!"

the 2nd grade girl only I would like
because I couldn't see her "cooties"
and she didn't see my color—

the 2nd grade teacher with a face all smooth,

her hair all light,
her voice like singing
until her navy man returned for her;
like a flower unstrung from the sun
she cried and clung ecstatic
against his unyielding uniform,
its blue the darkest we ever saw,
his aura raw like the war—

the kid whose right hand didn't work, "Lefty,"
who was left out of games till the only other choice
was Barry the smelly fat kid—

or Barry's sister who dressed "weird," he said
with a leer that mired the air
like germs when he laughed
"She's a slut."

or the silence in me then that rose
like smothering black smoke—

or Barry's brother Don who broke their old dad's leg
because he did their sister—

or the fish Don caught and cleaned alive
right before my eyes,
its heart unable to stop itself
under his probing switchblade—

or the too-large army surplus clothes Don always wore
as if a faded jacket could make a man
of any dropout during the draft—

the creek where as long as daylight held
we'd re-enact Bismarcks and Titanics
making drowning cries for plastic disasters,
then lob bigger rocks—

or Silly Willy who'd hug and kiss us
at any hockey goal, saying, "They do it on TV!"
until we yelled in his face, "EWW! Don't be GAY!"

or Will's sister whose hippy boyfriend on the couch
pushed her panties down in her unzipped cutoffs
stroking her musky crotch,
which I'd never seen, let alone smelled...

or the dust-cloud rug by the TV that I stumbled on, crashed in—

or Will's mom then just watching the evening news crying—

or her silver-framed Navy officer photo
making her weep
not because he was dead
but because, "He's gay," Will confessed,
"...and I think I am too, like my dad."

the rich kid Larry with well-groomed hair and perfect clothes
whose mom reclining on the couch
stroked my head like a cat's
until, half-hypnotized in my hair,
her eyes were wet with yearnings
and she called me her beautiful doll—

I could've been anyone

if only the cells of the self
would've let me out,
if only the war on
TV continually
would ever turn off,
but the time would come
just once in an eon
when I could be
ecstatic as any thing
beyond its self,
when I was
each injury,
every injuring word,
all the injured,
and each sun-struck wave
of grass blown to bliss,
each inhale of sky in
every tremulous body
losing itself inside an other's,
all the hiding selves who seek.