



9-15-2016

## *Places I Was Dreaming* Book Review

Corrie Williamson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>

 Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), [Photography Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Williamson, Corrie (2016) "*Places I Was Dreaming* Book Review," *Westview*: Vol. 32 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol32/iss2/9>

This Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).



# *Places I Was Dreaming*

## Book Review

by Corrie Williamson

A novel I dearly love was once praised by *The New York Times Book Review* as teaching us how to read it. This has always seemed to me a rare and precious gift indeed, and Loren Graham's latest book of poems, *Places I Was Dreaming* (released in February from CavanKerry Press) offers just that uncommon pleasure.

The book, Graham's third, follows a single speaker as did his first, *Mose*, a long narrative piece whose speaker is incarcerated in a Texas prison, but the speaker in *Places I Was Dreaming* is a young boy growing up in poverty in rural Oklahoma. Graham has described the book as loosely autobiographical, drawing on memories of his own childhood in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, and the authenticity of detail and depth of feeling in these poems is undeniable. The collection begins with a description of the house that many of the poems take place in and around:

House of clapboard warped and gapping,  
house with bees inside its walls,  
house rats frequented.

Piles of loosening plaster and lath,  
eyesore clucked at and pitied,  
object of dread and erosion:

Yes. Yes. That house.  
The one I called my house,  
our house, home.

This opening poem, with its lines diminishing slowly toward that single word, highlights many of the book's central concerns: how we perceive poverty, how we grow away from a place or lifestyle, and how names and language can powerfully shape our understanding of what we use them to describe. The poems are a kind of taphonomy, a study in the way memory, language, and those we love can decay or take on the hardness of fossilized bone.

While the imagery and narrative in Graham's poems evoke a hardscrabble kind of life—the mother cooking meals in the yard in a rusty oil drum, the father standing in line to receive government assistance—his speaker demands no pity and never falls prey to romanticizing the poverty in which he lives. Indeed, the book is often celebratory of the resourcefulness of its characters, of the comforting cacophony of overlapping voices within the ramshackle house, or the deep bonds of a family telling tales around a wood stove or in a storm cellar as a tornado rages outside. They are frequently comic, as the speaker encounters colorful persons or turns his youthful logic towards explaining events around him, from death to spelling to the unspoken but insistent presence of racism in his community.

Graham's speaker feels out meaning in rhythmic, incantatory phrases, which often recall older poetic styles. In one example, the boy recounts his first memory, a rat scurrying over his body: the line “a ghostly thing sat here a yellow-toothed guest” summons the caesura and alliterative verse styles of *Beowulf*, which is perfectly appropriate in a book that revels in tales born of darkness. Graham is a skilled formalist, as his previous book, *The Ring Scar*, showed with its often playful sonnet sequences. The poems of *Places I Was Dreaming*, however, feel loose; their rhymes are buried, and their forms are apparent only if you want to look. As the book goes on teaching us how to read it, that looking and wanting happen naturally; the poems train us to cock an ear and listen, to hear the iambic music of country speech, or spin in the slow erosion of a word's meaning. This occurs literally, for reader and speaker, in the poem “Elvis,” in which the boy, saying his dog's name over and over again, reminds us, “All you have to do / is keep on saying it and a word goes / all funny and the thing it means goes away” as he twirls dizzily around the yard.

Graham and the speaker in *Places I Was Dreaming* are both deeply concerned with the ability of words to give power or take it away. The book brims with storytelling: “a story ends however you say it does” the speaker asserts in a poem that describes a joyful, two-voiced collaboration with his grandfather, inventing a tall tale together about being chased by a bear. Several poems recount the boy's early attempts and struggles with reading and writing; another describes his first crush—the “story time girl” at the county library, “where every adult I knew advised / my future lay.” But, Graham's character also experiences first hand how language can oppress and break down, noting, “a name was a verdict and a kind of sentence,” as the boys on the bus call him cracker, tax stealer, and country boy, and his teacher tells him, “Shallow / habits of speech reflect a shallow / character.” In one poem, he carries a rifle, “as though it could / give me some say.” And, in one of the most moving moments in the book, an encyclopedia salesman comes to the house, and the boy accepts his father's surprising offer to buy the volumes, even though he knows “what my yessir meant to everyone present: / another month of beans, less coal for the fire, / my father's spending his winter evenings with a drop

light / in the unheated barn he used for a garage – / the real price of privilege, its great black bulk.”

These poems honor community and connection. In “The Day of the Swarm,” a poem in which the bees living in the house’s siding (mentioned in the opening poem) emerge *en masse*, Graham’s speaker listens to them “mumbling in the hive” and finds comfort in the way their language, their communal living, ties him to rest of the world. A reader, too, will find that satisfaction in these poems: “The measure of life, no matter the circumstance. / Its constant, incremental decay. Its sweet despite.” *Places I Was Dreaming* is an homage to “the spell / of silence undone” and to a vanishing place and time. These are deeply accessible, warm poems, the kind that weave a spell and beg to be spoken.

