

Four Poems by Melanie Graham

Farrah, Red Swimsuit Poster

Head tilted, smiling, multi-millions sold,
I loved her with an ache
like an ice cream brain freeze, only sweeter.

Broke the bank to buy her from my brother's friend who
said,
yeah, you can have it for two bucks
and looked at me sideways,

a little girl with a pink bicycle, silver streamers,
and a handful of quarters.
Even at eight, no breasts of my own to speak of,

I knew nipples, knew that's why boys push pinned her
beside the underwear women
from the Montgomery Ward catalog.

I'd tilt my head so our eyes would meet,
studying her ethereal teeth, the line of her thigh
against the Mexican blanket backdrop,

begging God to be this kind of woman
irrepressible, even when confined

-Melanie Graham

Water Fountains, 1951

we were thirsty girls
in the hot magnolia day
palms handclapping pink
from *run black man run*

in the hot magnolia day
shoes brown with dust
run the patterollers get you
stomping sidewalk cracks

shoes brown with dust
that man ran, that man flew
stomping sidewalk cracks
we raced for the fountains

that man tore his shirt in two
one black, one white
we raced for the fountains
unable to read the overhead signs

one Black, one White
palms handclapping pink
unable to read the overhead signs
we were thirsty girls

-Melanie Graham

Postcard, Cairo Illinois, 1909

A hand drawn x marks the spot
above iron lattice, where a stick figure
ascends the hand-tinted robin's egg sky,
where Hustler's Arch rainbows between buildings,
a mainstreet place for banners declaring
FireWorks! or Circus Come To Town!
And in a cursive of corresponding brown ink:
where they hung the coon.
The pink dust road below
is deserted, save a solitary person
stepping into the streetcar,
taking the tracks as far as they will go
from this picturesque place.

-Melanie Graham

Letter to the Face of a Lynched Housemaid, 1946

We came upon you yesterday in the grove
still beautiful—lips,
those eyelashes, that fine nose
A bas-relief of what they were,
reminding me of that house down the slope,
the window where, in last summer's storm—
Maybe you remember, the one
that uprooted hundreds-year-old oaks—
where the lady put her hand to the glass
And lightening ran up her arm, burned the cameo brooch
into her throat that swelled and blackened so
said she was buried in a high-necked dress
Stinking of blistered flesh and smoke,
but if you wade the weeds, past the iron posts
an outline of her is there, floating like a ghost.

-Melanie Graham