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Down on the Shore: The Family and Place That Forged a Poet's Voice

Adele V. Holden
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Again I conjure up/A brighter dream/And watch these embers/ Slowly ash and frost…

Holden grew up during the Depression on the isolated peninsula of Maryland known as the Eastern Shore. It was a place where black poverty and second-class citizenship were taken for granted by both whites and blacks. This memoir honors her father, Snow Holden, as a man who refused to let the status quo keep his children from receiving a better education than he had. Each time one of his dreams was suffocated, he persisted in “conjuring up a brighter dream.”

Growing up black in Pocomoke City during the Depression Era meant going to broken-down school buildings in a system that only went through ninth grade. Despite the all-encompassing fear that followed two lynchings in near-by towns, Snow pushed the whites in charge of the school system to add a tenth grade to the local school so black children could get one more year of education at home. He even went so far as to suggest that if they didn’t want to do that, black children would happily fill the empty desks in the new white school.

Decades before Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X ignited a nation-wide call for equal rights, a lone man in an isolated corner of the country fought amid possible violence and widespread hate to make life better for the children in his community. This was a time when he fought not just the white establishment, but the disheartened, frightened inertia of blacks as well.

In honest, uncomplicated words Holden shares the stories of struggle and celebration that make up the history of her family. Each chapter is prefaced by a verse of poetry, some taken from her 1961 collection Figurine and Other Poems, some previously unpublished. They set the theme for the chapter, but also serve to remind the reader throughout the story that it was the Holdens? struggles that shaped her success.

Her ability to show her father’s triumphs through the eyes of her childhood allows readers to discover for themselves how truly inspirational he was to her. This memoir would be an excellent addition to a high-school history class reading list, as well as private reading for anyone interested in the individual lives that make up the history of our country.

CHRISTINE CANFIELD (October 16, 1999)

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