

Lions

I once had a metaphor change my life. Before, all I saw was dead grass, brown and unwatered, after the snow left. But in a very little-noticed passage in a very little-noticed book, I read the phrase “lion-coloured hill” when I was nine. I tried to picture a “lion-coloured hill”, and then I understood. Afterwards, whenever I saw that dead grass that always follows when the snow melts too quickly, as in Canadian spring, I saw lions. It was as though in that dead gold, a great wild beast was sleeping, and it had been poured as you might pour paint all over the landscape. Even in the cracks between the cement where sparse tufts of furry grass grew not green, I saw lions growing out of the pavement.

One grade four lunch, I sat at a desk looking at the window, which was how all kids ate their lunches; but I was there early, and only Josiah Sinclair shared the room with me, calmly eating a sandwich as though the world were not exploding with lions. I moved over to the desk beside his, and I told him about it. I must have gone on for minutes, and other children started to arrive from the hallway. His face only showed a sort of stupid awe.

When I had finished, I waited for his response.

“Lions don’t grow out of pavement,” he informed me. “You can’t pour them out like paint. That would be very messy. I don’t even think there are any lions in Canada.” Then he beamed proudly.

I stared blankly, and what I was thinking was, What do you know about lions? Someday, when you are in Africa, and you find that a lion is eating you, I will be quite happy about it. But I didn’t say it out loud.

Then I left him to eat his sandwich with its lion-coloured mustard.