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Detroit Suburbs, 1976

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DETROIT SUBURBS, 1976

You might have missed them, the mothers,
heads bowed like wilted flowers,
fingers diligent as grubs in the dirt.
Their bonnets in all sizes, matching polyester shorts
and last year's golf shoes,
but I remember that species:
crouched on haunches in the yard,
a spate of mud on one brow or another,
calling our names like water fowl
across the imaginary division of yards.
Handfuls of thistles in their calico-print fingers,
their megaphone voices keeping time,
their eyes watching, just as they'd warned us,
invisibly from the backs of their heads.

This was the last horizon of automobile nirvana,
thirty-nine miles northwest of Detroit,
before barn country to the west,
after the trailer parks to the south,
and the factories clamoring north, gasping for air.
At 4:30, they'd amble toward their houses,
head-first, synchronized, wash the garden spades—
but not too well—place them on their varnished decks,
haul first-crop tomatoes and cucs inside for dinner,
material nostalgia, hunt and gather.
The men rode home in pre-rusted carpools,
smelled of aftershave and grease and gin.
To us they were almost indiscernible, the smells of men,
strong and talkative, thumbing their glasses,
stroking their chins, telling stories—
shadow-boxing The Man late into the night.

Our town might have been Mattel stock
if not for the obvious lack of pink—
terracotta and blacktop relieved the gardens
and the perfection. Skipper, Fluff, and Ginger
were nobody's children, or everybody's,
gathered in the cul-de-sacs of rocks and clover,
hopscotch stones in their hands,
playing in the confines of imagination:
one fence, one tree and a single basketball hoop—enough
for playing horse and house,
enough for planning our escapes.

How perfectly everything grew then,
each house framed by the car that dreamed it.
How perfectly those men mowed
the yards on Sunday afternoons.
How perfectly our mothers stirred the gin,
dropped the olive, dangled their communal fingers
into the glass pitcher and sucked.