

**E**ven when I loved it—North Sheridan black with rain, the tobacco smell of old Comiskey Park on a summer afternoon, the Polish shopkeepers scrubbing down their stoops until they glowed as glamorous as pearls—Chicago was full of strangers coming into and out of the weather. They lived somewhere in between, I suppose. They lived and moved without me. They didn't need me.

From the library, a cavern full of foreign newspapers, books that had weathered centuries, I'd leap against South State and lose myself inside the hum and buzz of taxis and broad-shouldered men whose wives—in kitchens papered with Kennedy,

calendars, and the Pope—rinsed cabbage and peeled onions. If it were going to snow, I'd study my shoes, wondering if they'd make it to spring. I was a foreigner. Everybody was a foreigner. Everybody disappeared and reemerged in the unlikeliest of basements or bars, clutching broken toys, beers, the jewelry that used to be their grandmothers'.

New York was a song, Los Angeles the great disguise, but Chicago was always a work in progress—an actor made to memorize and then forget, a jigsaw puzzle with its corner pieces blown away, a pound of sand lifted from the shore of Lake Michigan and spread unevenly to Omaha, to Denver, and to Cleveland.

Once there, I never wanted to leave. I wanted to find someone with a map, a woman who knew the secrets buried below St. Michael's, a man who as a boy saw Ernie Banks and, therefore, understood America. My Chicago was a poem blurred and bleared by history and violence and the questions children think about before they fall asleep.

I remember mornings on Michigan Avenue when those summer baseball afternoons seemed nothing more than jargon. I remember standing among the Trib's obituaries all swirling, wondering what my name would look like on those pages. Would they get it right? Would they get my story right, and me, a small man easily forgotten,

a stranger too? Would they even care? I would've written my own then, but I was young, and death was just another among the myriad strangers rushing, strolling, seeking miracles. In Lincoln Park I looked for something after dark, but found only myself staring back. Where were you? Why were the benches arrayed with the feathers of long-dead birds? Why was the sky a color no one could describe?

Years later, these questions remain unanswered. Perhaps their answers can't be spoken aloud. Perhaps there are no human answers, but only the ones I used to hear whispered among the leaves that fell and gathered in the alleys off Lake Shore Drive. ✱✱

# MY CHICAGO CARL BOON

image info