

1972

I went back to Racine this year.
Nothing was the same. Even the alleyways were clean.
Mops stood propped just-so against brick walls
beside the steel-reinforced back doors
of shops stuffed with a thousand ticket items.

Toyotas Hondas, Subarus in forty different sheens
idled at red lights. Drivers nudged their gas pedals,
nosed on down the ave. Lawns shone emerald
and the porches seemed roomy, well ordered.
Hell's bells, I don't even remember porches.

I didn't hear one jack-legged, fool-child
with an overhead cam gun up Washington St.,
screach to a halt, lay rubber when the light changed,
smoke pouring backward out of a cracked window.
I had to drive around and around to find suet,
chimneys, factory grime, and rusting chain link.

At least no one leered. At least there were no catcalls
to the walking, working girls that once headed to factory jobs
or walked in to waitress at some hole-in-the wall
that served liverwurst, corned beef, cokes, and sorrow.

Still, I miss the whole mess terribly. Mostly
how we were together talking up Dostoevski,
Rimbaud, Leonard Cohen, and tossing back shots,
laughing, flipping LPs on the stereos—that jolt
and hiss of the needle as it first found its groove—
laughing, dancing in and out of shadows
at barrooms where the customers blew in out of February.

Men in plaid woolen coats whose tongues were crippled
except when they talked about carburetor or quarterbacks
and plain women whose laps were full of the earth.
Women who forgave the men because they had little choice.
Forgave them for the sake of lust. Women who swore
like the men and men who swore about everything
because swearing was the first trigger they had for their feelings.

We lived there, all of us, three winters, in the thick of it,
determined to balance out all we saw that was wrong
and all we saw that was right. We saw so much, read,
drank, danced, and, likewise, cursed the half of it.

by Ed Ruzicka



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