

Cedar-Riverside, Minneapolis, Circa 1990

Benjamin D. Carson

"Dog-tired, suisired, will now my body down
near Cedar Avenue in Minneap,
where my crime comes."

— "The Poet's Final Instruction," John Berryman

We small-town kids, refugees from the Dakota plains,
screamed
our way into one half of this twin city and, each in our turn,
were forged by its streets and seared in the alembic of
adolescent mania.
From the 8th floor of a high-rise, flecked with Rothkos
— fading panels of blue and white and red and yellow — and
with a view
of the Mississippi and the bridge from which Berryman took
a fatal plunge,
we blazed, shorn of sense, muddle-brained, and found
company, our tribe,
in the patients on the ward of Cedar and Riverside: Earthy B
and his pyramid
of televisions, Shorty Mac and his Night Train, and Ten Bear
trading peyote for pot.

And it was on this corner where Phil, whose preferred poetic
form was fists,
failed to match wits, one flailing night, with a one-armed
Ethiopian, who,
having unscrewed his hand from his arm, stamped his
prosthetic poetry of war
on Phil's deserving face, blue-black spondees on his cheeks
and jowl.
Enjambment.

And it was here, in a frenzy of insobriety, the contents of our
refrigerator flew
from the balcony as though we, the wardens of the ward,
were feeding sharks
from the bow of a listing ship, the hull vomiting up chum, a
blitz of food-bombs
raining down on rooftops, victuals for scavengers in a sea of
concrete and noise.
Pin joints, sustenance of a kind, hid under the microwave, an
amuse-bouche.

In the foam and froth of youth, we, indignant spirits
unbound, were hungry,
fed by the urge to shape something, to name the rinds of
waste that mottle
the cityscape, to give rise to a poem in which we, the new
arrivals, fresh flotsam,
washed up as we were from a sea of grass, got to the heart of
something, set the rhythm,
the "I AMs," to an unsettled life; and so it was here, on this
corner, overlooking rooftops
and the bridge from which Berryman took a fatal plunge,
that we, for a time, lived,
the place where Cedar meets Riverside.

The Hole

Benjamin D. Carson

She stood staring into the darkness, as if waiting for it to speak, to reveal something about itself. This was the first time she'd seen the hole, the hole behind her house and the nothingness it cradled. She didn't know where it'd come from or who'd dug it. When she knelt close to its open mouth, cool air breathed her hair back, and she closed her eyes to listen. She felt a stone beneath her hand, rubbed it between her fingers, and then brought it to her lips. "Gone," she whispered, before dropping it into the hole. She waited, ear to its lip, and waited, hearing only silence in reply.

The Trapping Web

Benjamin D. Carson

All of that is nothing to me, she says, reaching toward the sky, as if the gesture would free her from the bullseye. I will not look back, she says, craning her neck, the sting of salt in her eyes.

I'm out, she says, laughing, as if that too will leave her unencumbered, free of night sweats, the shadows that move in her room after sundown, saying, we are still here.

It's nothing, she shrugs, as the spider circles, spinning its trapping web around her legs and arms, her mouth. And she thinks: How lucky it is to unspool itself in thin pearls of only now, now, and now.

The Final Cut

Benjamin D. Carson

I cut up a poem, I confess, and want to keep what is left,
consonants and vowels like fingers and toes
scattered on a highway. And I wonder:
what if we didn't murder to dissect
but to murd and er and diss and ect,
left parts un-scrutinized, only sounds of a crime:
a gurgle, a slashing of sorts, in the throat.

I moved my fingers across a scar on my lover's wrist,
and over the ridges on her thighs, tracks to nowhere,
and said nothing, just worried them, lines unreadable.
Then, just above a whisper, she says, I dreamt of birds,
a wake of vultures, picking at my flesh, and I await, await now
the final cut.