1985

As If Herbert Street Meant This

Robert Lietz

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As If Herbert Street Meant This


Up to sun through the thick drapes in the lower flat on Herbert, I listen to the knife sharpener or huckster practicing his loud cries, gliding upstreet behind wheel and bell or balanced on the board spanning the front of his roofed wagon.

Syracuse, the Fifties. The horses ease along our street under the thick-leaved elms and maples. Wives appear on their front stoops calling out their orders. My shyness turns me back from glass. Jerked back and forward like a boy learning to drive standard, I see myself, striped shirt, corduroys, scratching touchdown plays on asphalt, a newspaper football spiralling toward an intersection end zone. Tonight, blue fire traces a split log, dances yellow and burns out. I listen to wind snap through the lilac branches. The iceman lumbers the open stairs up to our landlady. Listen to her thanks distilled from Krakow, to him in flannel pouring down those failing stairs, crossing Herbert to his wagon. I own what compression the years make of grassed front lawns, curbless urban streets. The faces and voices of that July become a mist and burden now, the racket of the coalchute on a Tuesday when I ought to be at school, or at Thanksgiving or at Christmas, snow paling coal and iron, compelling the broken line of a boy’s sight to something marvelous, backing the boy from his cold window, the motion of his hands smoothing the goosebumps off his forearms.

—Robert Lietz