

Daniel Hudson Burnham

Burnham had never heard the word “exurbs”  
when drafting his plan.

He had never heard prefab, big box,  
mega-anything when he asked:

*Must we go elsewhere to enjoy the fruits of independence?*

*If the city does not become better as it becomes bigger, shall the defect not be remedied?*

He never had to explain how intently  
we ought to search for *elsewhere*.

He never had to plant the mile markers  
to show the distance to a bruise of villages

where every decade trustees vote  
to paint another anxious mural

that really means to announce  
“Big Things Should Be Happening Here.”

Access to there from here promised  
by a disintegrating lace of highways.

Maybe he never predicted sprawl  
feeding off his boulevards,

sketching only a humble garland  
of suburbs to crown the city

as carpenters hammered out the hour  
more often than the bells of their parishes.

He claimed Chicago influences an empire  
bigger than the nations of Europe.

A bulldozed swampland empire  
neglected for weekend escapes.

He never considered the individual an island  
or that a remedy was to build five million castles.

He never imaged mailboxes stickered with rifles  
or that his definition of ample would be insufficient.

He never guessed that our hunger for ourselves  
would be amplified under the siege of sun and wind.

He never thought we'd scrape clay gardens  
between furrows of broken glass.

Did he believe ghost towns would sleep only in the West?

What did he see for us when he capped his pen and ink?

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Beyond the drawing board, soil churns beneath each blacktop  
and melon-sized eruptions of asphalt ripen in seared prairies.

A scavenged chunk of cornice sits like a treasured fossil  
on an architect's desk, a reminder that ruin must be risked.