

*Chicago*

Walking the same streets  
that my grandfather walked  
in his paperboy cap, coat checked  
or seersucker, my grandfather and his  
winsome ladyfriends wearing  
pressed yellow dresses  
and laughing in step  
in spring along Grand  
and Western, where his  
son remembers playing baseball  
and his wife wore out rubber gloves  
scrubbing pots and freezing gravy  
from St. Joseph's day.

Along the west side streets,  
I'm picking landmarks off  
like they were fruit, the skyline east  
looms so cold, an electric invite  
to something more refined  
than standing in a soup line.  
And here at last is the bakery  
across the 16<sup>th</sup> street  
viaduct parting neighborhoods  
like the Red Sea,  
the midday steam and hiss of train cars  
marooned, backing traffic back to Halsted.  
I get out, stretch and seek  
an empanada with sweet potato,  
champurrado and elotes, a respite  
in the languid afternoon  
on any Friday in Chicago  
not working hard  
like crossing guards  
in the Loop warning pedestrians  
to please be mindful of the lights  
changing yellow, red  
like the sky as the sun sets west  
on Racine, like it did  
when I was twenty-two  
and came to know  
intimately the futility  
of afternoons in classrooms  
when the L&L opened early  
and asked only a dollar a draft  
or years before when friends  
marveled at my knowledge

of Chicago streets that had not yet  
called me a resident, still  
a kid from Bridgeview,  
a suburbanite pre-transplant,  
an eyeful of infinite lake water  
and a nose full of car exhaust.

My father felt  
all the danger palpable  
when walking down Ontario  
west where the sting of sirens  
was common Saturdays growing up  
toward the suburban relocation  
that precipitated moving two states  
away from Gonella bread and side-  
street alleyways kicking cans,  
busted glass underfoot.  
My father went walking  
through Erie and Western,  
an upbringing he romanticizes  
when back for christenings  
and I walk his steps as well,  
and his father's steps— his brother,  
my unknown great uncle, who  
grew into a drunken disappointment,  
inside the house hiding from  
a tyrannical father  
or so I imagine are the roots  
of my life in Chicago  
digging back toward Bari, salt  
sea town brighter than  
the streetlights of Taylor and  
Laflin where I wash up  
like the dead fish  
on the 6:00 AM Lake Michigan  
beach. This Tri-  
Taylor evening holds  
the homeless to its breast,  
tightly, the unyielding  
night of passersby without  
a dime to spare  
for the beggars of Ashland,  
and agony over  
unearthed projects  
remade as banks and condos,  
though the neighborhood long ago

went to the lions of the  
University of Illinois  
and Maxwell Street is  
no longer the filthy  
bazaar we like to recollect  
in our most mythological moods.  
It was but a matter of time  
and the dirt and grime got  
paved into pubs where they charge  
five dollars a pint while  
across the street Joe DiMaggio's  
statue stands, the Yankee Clipper's  
swing about to be unfurled  
and water spilling from the fountain  
under his feet and  
fewer Italian families  
living among the walk-ups  
or walking through the park  
or buying Italian ice from Mario's  
or beef from Al's.

I never walked Taylor Street until my thirties,  
having arrived like an immigrant from Archer  
Avenue, which is where I'd call home  
if I had to plant a flag, make my  
family proud of their south side,  
the undeniable Polish bakeries, the taquerías  
and Toro Loco bar, Lindy's Chili and  
Gertie's Ice Cream, Unique  
thrift stores flanking the potholed,  
pigeon strewn asphalt across  
Archer from Chinatown to Resurrection  
Cemetery past Argo Products  
rendering corn meal into acrid stink,  
the high school down on 63<sup>rd</sup> street  
in a haze of maize fog and marijuana,  
like dead-eyed Mike and  
Lou and Chuck  
delivering pizzas to the  
Pink Palace sex motel.  
Walking Archer is more  
than precarious at night  
along the Summit, IL  
crack across Harlem, the Dog House,  
Little Brown Jug and Deep Summit Pub  
open until 2AM and then

another round at Touch of Class  
on Meade, open until 4 and ensuring  
a mix of every social strata  
on the southwest side, and then  
to El Famous or El Faro  
for a fat burrito and thin horchata  
before Bosa (which  
does not stand for Brothers of  
Saudi Arabia) Donuts  
opens and the weary lights climb  
over Damen Ave.

Truck drivers sip weak  
coffee at the Huck  
Finn diner after sleeping  
in a sleeper behind  
the cab, stopping  
for solace on Archer,  
driving across Indiana  
to Illinois, to Iowa  
and all towns in-between  
to deliver,  
as my Grandfather did,  
plywood or other such  
necessary sundries.  
It's hard in winter  
to get across the drifts  
and blizzard torn  
streets, like my Grandfather  
encountered  
in 1979 when  
he was held up  
days with other truckers  
and stranded, lit  
plywood to stay warm  
and cooked his comrade's  
Dave Berg Hot Dogs from the  
refrigerated truck, sipping  
stolen 7-Up.

Truckers get going and the  
Stevenson enlivens,  
morning traffic waking  
and moving like stray dogs  
making their way from  
Back of the Yards,

nearing Bridgeport  
and the old stomping grounds  
of the old boss and his son  
(daily appearing in some  
sort of scandal  
or so it seems whenever  
you open the paper),  
traveling by more regal  
escort from 35<sup>th</sup> Street  
to City Hall,  
not stopping in Pilsen,  
as I do for a view  
of the tiled Orozco  
school with mosaics  
of Octavio Paz  
Frida and Diego,  
Siquieros, Chavez  
and, *claro*, Orozco himself  
rubbing shoulders with  
Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl  
getting a strong scent  
of tortillas cooking  
at El Milagro where  
Sundays are devoted  
to ensalada de nopales  
and 18<sup>th</sup> Street strolls that  
take you through the  
main artery of a divided  
neighborhood, snaking  
at Halsted to Ruble  
to the expressway  
back north to Roger's Park  
and an omnipresent glance  
across the street and over  
the shoulder as you nervously  
fumble for your keys.

The weather grows  
warmer and with the rise  
in temperature is the rise  
in fear because  
every denizen recalls  
how gunshots grow  
when spring gives  
up the ghost.  
Even in Edgewater there

were knives out and nights  
when walking home seemed  
a heroic task.  
The East Africans  
and Ethiopian restaurants  
stop serving at ten, just time  
enough to walk off  
baskets of injera and  
walk to your door  
and hope to avoid  
the reckless taxis  
rolling down Broadway  
south to Uptown's ragged  
avenues, toward the  
Uptown Theatre  
which went the way  
of all flesh long ago, yet  
without the good sense  
to let go the cataract boards  
and far-off dust  
that can't even remember  
whether Tommy Dorsey  
or Duke Ellington  
was supposed to have  
led a stomp on the  
dilapidated hardwood.  
Everyone has a story  
about the place  
even those of us  
who never walked inside,  
only lingered in the cold air  
three hours across  
the street while waiting  
in the Aragon Ballroom  
line along the alley,  
under the tracks,  
where security guards  
asked us to take it  
easy on them and  
the homeless asked for dollars  
and the dealers for a little bit more.  
I watch the planks  
covering up the Uptown,  
advertisements pasted  
over the wood,  
construction ivy growing

on its walls, its marvelous  
façade eclipsed until  
it is time to walk again  
and leave the old white  
elephant alone on Broadway,  
as generations have done,  
as I have done flying by  
on the Red Line through  
the Lawrence stop to Wilson  
and the slow crawl across  
construction hot spots,  
yawning in the morning rush  
and back north in the evening  
past the old weathered homes  
these too flat buildings,  
riddled with the shards of countless  
tenants, slanted floors and dull  
painted rooms housing  
dust-pressed remembrances  
of things passed over,  
the oven needing a kitchen  
match-light, the living room heated  
by a Warm Morning gas furnace  
shaking when ignited,  
these museums of past  
domesticity dating from just after  
the Chicago fire, having sprung  
from the reconstruction  
to be rented to students  
or others equally financially  
embarrassed finding stucco  
walls fit for back scratching  
and windows leaking summer rain.

The Red Line subway  
before it becomes  
elevated, before it rises out  
of subterranean belly-crawling,  
weaves and jerks and, worse,  
stalls between Chicago and  
Clark and Division  
when I spy two men and my ears  
perk up to hear one say:  
“You just moved here?  
Man, you’ll love it.  
You’ll love Chicago”

and the newcomer smiles as  
newcomers do before they become  
accustomed to the bleary  
persistence of the morning  
commute, the lunch rush, the grind  
of the train when signals  
prohibit clearance and  
you wait wondering  
about the roach you saw  
when you got home last night  
and if you ought to call the land-  
lord or just wait it out and see,  
about the car and the bump  
up in insurance rates  
and gas prices and the winter  
that's clawed this city's streets  
and won't lessen its grip,  
about the people you  
know and the ones you knew  
and who left when  
and went where and  
who slept with whom and  
stuck around to grow  
older every year  
and the lake looks green  
and the river is dyed that way  
every St. Pat's day  
but they can't get it back  
to blue, as we say every year  
and laugh at the old joke  
as if it were the least bit funny.

You're going to love  
Lincoln Park and Lakeview,  
Old Town, The Gold Coast,  
where the young come  
to town, where they feel safe  
among other young people,  
where they drink Fridays  
and sleep Sundays  
and jog and bike  
and eat tapas and Thai,  
where they sweat in apartments  
they cannot afford  
until they finish law school  
and join the upercrass

overfed or, otherwise,  
run from the near north  
side and discover Jefferson  
Park or Ravenswood,  
Old Irving or some  
such residential part  
of town to plant  
their family trees.

You'll love Chicago  
the way I've loved it  
in my vagabond youth  
and came to commit myself  
fully to every mile  
of the so-called second city  
that I first saw  
as an infant  
and have since left  
so many times  
in search of a more perfect  
union that I tried to  
manufacture and does  
not seem to exist.

You'll love Chicago  
the way my grandmother's father  
loved it and left it  
and came back from a failed  
strawberry farm in Louisiana  
and reclaimed his stake  
on Western Avenue  
and raised eleven children  
who couldn't leave either.