

House Beautiful

The lady across the hall
smoked, and her cigarettes trailed
through the plumbing into my apartment.
As Bill and my sister and brother-in-law

moved my stuff out of the Soviet-bloc-
style apartments in Columbia Heights, Minnesota,
she opened the door
and yelled drunken gibberish at my sister.

Rita lived in a Wisconsin cabin outside the cities
for three seasons of the year, with Binks,
a pet turtle, and Chippie, an uninvited
chipmunk. The sign outside Richmond reads,

The City Beautiful. Neither of these places
was home. When Rita turned sixteen,
our mother set fire to her sheets
as Rita slept in bed. Through the flames,

she sang to her, Happy Birthday
to you, Happy Birthday to you.
Six blocks down from the Capitol
in Nebraska, I once soaked in the tub

with my headphones on, Paul
in bed, the phallic deco building
glowing in the flood lights
as cars circled its base,

men cruising
in what was known as the fruit loop.
That was my apartment. Long story short:

I later moved in with him, then I moved out.

Okay, back up: I came home from the party
just noticing the rips in my shirt from the fight,
and he had pushed the furniture in front of the doors
so I couldn't get in.

Later, by myself in my own apartment
on thirteenth and "B" Street,
I sat in front of the speckled mirror tiles,
free Gevalia coffee-maker brewing its first pot of coffee,

watching myself eat a delivered pizza,
with *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* playing
on a UHF channel. Believe it or not,
that was the closest to home I'd gotten by then.

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"Playing Tea Party with Dylan." Photo: Rita Hermann.