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“As if to say ‘Jeez!’”: Blight and Ecstasy in the Old Neighborhood

Carlo Rotella

I was invited to speak at the Fordham symposium on urbanism and religion because I write about urbanism, especially the literatures and cultures of cities, not because I have had much to say in print about religion. So I took the invitation as an opportunity to go back over some of the terrain I have been through and see it differently in light of the symposium’s organizing theme. And I thought it might be useful, in particular, to explicitly think out a way to bring together urbanism, religion, and literature in an analytical synthesis.

Let me start with what I mean by “urban” because it shapes what I have to say about literature and religion. I take it as axiomatic that the quality that makes a city a city is density. None of the typically cited traits of urban life is unique to cities: suburbs and towns and even farm districts can all feature relatively significant concentrations of population, business, creative types, social diversity, high property values, redevelopment, central-place functions, anonymity, verticality, crime, government, human transformation of the natural world, the layering of cultural and social orders and institutions, and all the other traits usually identified with cities. Urbanness is a spectrum, not a matter of either/or. A town is more urban than a farm, and a farm more urban than a national park, but even a national park is a little bit urban. What makes a city a city is a matter of degree: Where those typical traits are most densely present, a place can be recognized as most urban, and we call it a city. “Urbanism” describes the ways in which people live in such places, which means the study of urbanism can be seen as the study of lives and cultures within the conditioning frame of density.

This article was originally delivered as a lecture at “Urbanism and American Religion,” a symposium at the Center for American Catholic Studies, Fordham University, October 25, 2003. Portions of it, especially elements of the close readings of Algren’s *The Man with the Golden Arm* and Dybek’s “Blight,” have been adapted from *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

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To call literature “urban” is to read for how writing engages with what makes a city a city. One way to treat urban literature as a genre is to read with an eye for the density of urban process—how novels make epic from redevelopment or ethnic succession, how poets (like cinematographers) derive an aesthetic from the cityscape’s architectural complexity, how journalism and crime fiction and science fiction and the romance distinctively figure the flow of capital or contact between social classes.

Here, for example, is the beginning of a short story published in 1990 entitled “Blight,” by Stuart Dybek, a Chicago writer who, if I were looking to label him, I would call a “postindustrial magic realist.”

During those years between Korea and Vietnam, when rock and roll was being perfected, our neighborhood was proclaimed an Official Blight Area.

Richard J. Daley was mayor then. It seemed as if he had always been, and would always be, the mayor. Ziggy Zilinsky claimed to have seen the mayor himself riding down Twenty-Third Place in a black limousine flying one of those little purple pennants from funerals, except his said WHITE SOX on it. The mayor sat in the backseat sorrowfully shaking his head as if to say “Jeez!” as he stared out the bulletproof window at the winos drinking on the corner by the boarded-up grocery.

Of course, nobody believed that Zig had actually seen the mayor. Ziggy had been unreliable even before Pepper Rosado had accidentally beamed him during a game of “it” with the bat. People still remembered as far back as third grade when Ziggy had jumped up in the middle of mass yelling, “Didja see her? She nodded! I asked the Blessed Virgin would my cat come home and she nodded yes!”

All through grade school the statues of saints winked at Ziggy. He was in constant communication with angels and the dead. And Ziggy sleepwalked. The cops had picked him up once in the middle of the night for running around the bases in Washtenaw Playground while still asleep.

When he’d wake up, Ziggy would recount his dreams as if they were prophecies. He had a terrible recurring nightmare in which atomic bombs dropped on the city the night the White Sox won the pennant. He could see the mushroom cloud rising out of Comiskey Park. But Zig had wonderful dreams, too. My favorite was the one in which he and I and Little Richard were in a band playing in the center of St. Sabina’s roller rink.

After Pepper brained him out on the boulevard with a bat—a fungo bat that Pepper whipped like a tomahawk across a twenty-yard width of tulip garden that Ziggy was trying to hid behind—Zig stopped seeing visions of the saints. Instead, he began catching glimpses of famous people, not movie stars so much as big shots in the news. . . .

We’d be walking along down Twenty-second and pass an alley and Ziggy would say, “See that?”

“See what?”

“Mayor Daley scrounging through garbage.”

We’d all turn back and look but only see a bag lady picking through cans.

Still, in a way, I could see it from Ziggy’s point of view. Mayor Daley *was* everywhere. The city was tearing down buildings for urban renewal and tearing up streets for a new expressway, and everywhere one looked there were signs in front of the rubble reading:

SORRY FOR THE INCONVENIENCE
ANOTHER IMPROVEMENT
FOR A GREATER CHICAGO
RICHARD J. DALEY, MAYOR¹

My first instinct in pursuing an urban reading of this passage would be to read for density in the layering of orders, the persistence of an older form of urbanism (an older landscape and older ways of living in it) and the emergence of a new urbanism (a newer landscape and newer ways of living in it) that partially succeeds the old. And I would begin with the figure of Richard J. Daley, who pervades and broods over this landscape. Daley was the greatest old-style boss to rise through the ranks of the greatest immigrant-ethnic political machine, but his career has a sharp edge of irony: He presided over the dismantling of the industrial neighborhood order that produced him and the machine. In Ziggy Zilinsky’s vision, Daley passes like Shiva, god of destruction, through a social landscape in transition—boarded-up grocery stores and cleared lots, the detritus of an older city falling into ruin and ripe to be succeeded by something new and strange, the process all marked with Daley’s signature on the sign.

Urban historians have not yet given a name to the period “between Korea and Vietnam” when both rock and roll and the notion of “blight” requiring “urban renewal” were perfected. During that crucial period, political leaders like Daley and their allies in private enterprise bent vast streams of federal money toward a particular kind of redevelopment project: the work of reconfiguring the social landscape of industrial cities, especially the manufacturing and cultural capitals of the Midwest and Northeast, for a postindustrial, suburbanizing age. During that period, also, the exodus from immigrant-ethnic neighborhoods accelerated into what came to be called—imprecisely, often enough—white flight.

Dybek’s “Blight” shows how its narrator, Dave, and his friends weather this transformation of inner-city urbanism in the 1950s and early 1960s, as the old European immigrant-ethnic-dominated neighborhood order begins to break up and migrants from other places—Mexico and the American South, especially—establish a new order. Dave’s crew navigates this difficult historical moment and this changing landscape, managing to wring from them a mix of everyday experience and ecstatic experience, captured so well in the thumbnail account of Ziggy’s school career, which adds up to what I mean by “postindustrial magic realism.”

Then there is the matter of that nodding Virgin, those winking saints, that “Jeez!” They are not just signs of declining or emergent urbanisms, not just markers of social or cultural orders in transition; they are elements of a religious tradition of meaning making. So, how to approach a reading concerned with *both* urbanism and religion? To

1. Stuart Dybek, “Blight,” in *The Coast of Chicago* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 42–44. Further references will be made in the text.

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return to the basic principle I started from, such a reading would take into account the density of religion in the city, by which I mean at least two things. First, there is the social density of religious institutions: the clustering in cities of churches, temples, mosques, religiously oriented universities and publications, and so on. Second, there is a less quantifiable but equally important density of religious feeling. The sheer compression of lives and souls in the city, the crowded profusion of religious imagery, speech, and thought, produce a density of religious investment in the cityscape (not unlike the density of financial investment that makes urban property values higher than in other places).

I want to suggest how both kinds of religious density operate in “Blight”—that is, I want to offer a reading of this text that brings together urbanism, religion, and literature under the rubric of density. But to do that, I need to step back to an earlier text, an earlier moment, to give a sense of the kind of literature that Dybek’s writing builds on and succeeds. I want to give a feel for the literary landscape that Dybek redevelops: in particular, stories about the transformation of Chicago’s old eastern European immigrant neighborhoods, and, in general, stories of decline.

The opening of “Blight” makes the story seem as if it is going to exemplify the decline, an important formula in urban literature. The decline is one of our favorite ways to handle the overlap of urbanisms and orders—that is, by narrating the overlap as the collapse of what was rather than the arrival of what will be. “What will be” looks like formless chaos; “what was” becomes, in retrospect, a lost golden age—not just one layer of urban order but the embodied principle of order itself. The complementary formula, equally important, is the booster narrative, which works the other way: the orderly golden age is coming, and the chaotic or mummified past must get out of the way. Mayor Daley and his cronies told a lot of booster stories to legitimate their grand-scale redevelopment projects, the execution of which occasioned innumerable decline narratives.

Dybek is neither a booster nor a narrator of decline. “Blight” starts out sounding like a decline, however, and we need to reckon with that. So let us go back, for the sake of comparison, to an analogous moment from a definitive literary decline, Nelson Algren’s novel *The Man with the Golden Arm*, published in 1949, which helped to set the pattern for literary treatment of the post–World War II city. Algren was in this regard a seminal figure who gave especially full and lasting literary expression to one of American culture’s most basic reactions to urban change: “There goes the neighborhood.” Algren was also a Chicago writer, and Chicago writers from the old neighborhood like Dybek still have to reckon with Algren’s ghost and with the ghost of Algren’s Chicago.

During the virtuoso first movement of *The Man with the Golden Arm*, a character named Sophie Majcinek sits in her wheelchair at the window at night, looking out onto the low-rise landscape of Polish neighborhoods around Milwaukee Avenue and Division Street on Chicago’s Near Northwest Side. Her husband, Frankie, is across the street at Nifty Louie Fomorowski’s, shooting morphine, a habit he picked up in the

army during the war. Prominent among his many reasons to seek solace in morphine is the guilt he feels for having crippled Sophie in a drunken car accident. Things are only going to get worse over the next couple of hundred pages.

Drifting in and out of sleep, Sophie remembers an idealized version of the neighborhood superimposed over the present. In the 1920s and early 1930s, she recalls, “everything was so well arranged,” an order exemplified above all in ethnically flavored Catholic rituals she and Frankie performed: passing the white wafer of friendship; carrying the Easter lamb to Old St. Stephen’s to be blessed; “Feasts of the Epiphany, when she and Frankie had marked neighbors’ doorways with the letters that remembered ancestral kings.”² Recalling a golden age when the street was sacred space and the marks of ancestral kings could be found inscribed into the landscape of low-rise walkups, factory buildings, and Polonia-suffused institutions like churches and bars, Sophie imagines the immanence of God in the old neighborhood order: “God weighed virtue and sin then to the fraction of the ounce, like Majurcek the Grocer weighed sugar” (62). The bells of St. Stephen’s rang out over the neighborhood, announcing that particular God’s presence and warning the adolescent Sophie and Frankie not to go all the way in their hideout under the porch of an abandoned house.

Between that horse-and-wagon time and the present (which is 1949), something has gone wrong in a large and hard-to-figure way: part of it is that the neighborhood’s “gettin’ smokier,” as Sophie puts it; part of it is that the old ways seem to be breaking up, a process that she can feel but not actually see. Here are some snippets of the extended scene as Sophie nods and wakes at her window at midnight, still waiting for Frankie to come home.

Moonlight that had once revealed so many stars now showed her only the city was bound, from southeast to the unknown west, steel upon steel upon steel: how all its rails held the city too tightly to the thousand-girdered El.

Some nights she could scarcely breathe for seeing the flat unerring line of cable and crosslight and lever, of signal tower and switch. For the endless humming of telephone wires murmuring insanely from street to street without ever saying a single word above a whisper that a really sensible person might understand.

For the city too was somehow crippled of late. The city too seemed a little insane. Crippled and caught and done for with everyone in it. . . .

She grew tense to see how the nameless people were bound, as they went, to the streets as the streets seemed bound to the night and the night to the nameless day. And all days to a nameless remorse.

No one moved easily, freely and unafraid any longer, all hurried worriedly to work and anxiously by night returned. . . .

2. Nelson Algren, *The Man with the Golden Arm* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990), 62. Further references will be made in the text.

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For since [the night of her car accident] everyone had become afraid of closing time everywhere, of having the lights go out in the middle of the dance while the chimes of all the churches mourned: a requiem for everyone trapped beneath the copper-colored sky of noon or the night-lit ties of the El. . . .

Tonight the moon held to the leaning ladders of the rain as it rose. She moved her chair with it till she could see where the flickering warning lamps burned, along the El's long boundaries, like vigil lamps guarding the constant boundaries of night. Could see even the passengers in the cars as the locals slowed toward the station.

All night, each night, waiting for Frankie in dry weather or wet, whether the moon held to the farther crosslights or to the near-at-hand signal tower, the vigil lights burned faithfully to guard a night gone false. They seemed so right, so dependable and true, in a world gone wrong, all wrong. . . .

Till darkness brought her sleep on a weary handcar, switching her onto a nowhere train that curved and descended, softly and endlessly, out up on the vast roundhouse of El dreams. . . .

She wakened in the chair to hear the last echo of St. Stephen's fading across this present midnight's dreaming roofs. And her whole life, from her careless girlhood until this crippled night, seemed caught within that fading chime. For now, as though no time had passed but the time it had taken to dream it, the leaves were stiff with age again, sultry September had come and gone and the wind was blowing the flies away.

"God has forgotten us all," Sophie told herself quietly. (96-99)

The overlapping bells, remembered and present, bring her out of reverie and into a moment of apocalyptic insight: "God has forgotten us all." Majurcek the grocer has given way to Nifty Louie the morphine salesman.

This autumnal passage captures the diffuse sense of dread associated with imminent reconfiguration of the social and cultural landscape into something new and strange. Algren, like his literary ally Budd Schulberg, whose novel *Waterfront*³ covers much of the same territory, was not a Catholic, nor was he interested in Catholicism as a religious tradition. Rather, Algren, Schulberg, and others drew from a menu of Catholic imagery to figure the experiential complexity and institutional rootedness of an urbanism that post-World War II American culture increasingly saw as in decline, if not in ruins. "God has forgotten us all" means, in this context, that the network of orders enabling and defining industrial urbanism has begun to break up.

"God has forgotten us all" can also be read to denote a literary-historical kind of end-times logic. At midcentury, Nelson Algren was the latest contender to come out of a tradition of Chicago realism that he traced back through Wright, Farrell, and Sandburg to Dreiser, predecessors who collectively took up the emergence of the modern industrial city as their great subject. But Algren reached literary maturity in the late 1940s, and even during the war-related manufacturing boom he could already feel that

3. New York: Random House, 1955.

familiar urbanism beginning to slide into the past. Suburbanization, centrally directed redevelopment, plant closings, the gradual falling away of Old Country influences, and the formation and expansion of the second ghetto and the barrio—these big groundswells were beginning to shake up the urban village in which Algren set his best work, the Polish Triangle around Milwaukee and Division. At the same time, he began to sense the intellectual climate turning colder to his brand of Chicago realism and to the increasingly quaint-seeming assumption that the once-holy trinity of urbanization, immigration, and industrialization were burning issues about which great novels were still to be written.

In other words, Algren had two old neighborhoods—the urban village and the genre of the big fat Chicago realist novel that had traditionally addressed such places—and as early as 1949, even at the moment of his greatest success when his masterpiece still had that new-car smell and people were saying he was the next big thing, he could already feel both foundations beginning to slide out from under him. This double sense of imminent, sweeping, catastrophic decline overhangs *The Man with the Golden Arm*. Something terrible but unspecified is happening or about to happen, and it will transform not only the old neighborhood but also the ways in which we know it.

But let us not rule out reading “God has forgotten us all” as being, in fact, about God. Or, more precisely, about a layer of God, yet one more form of urban order that accrues alongside all the others—architectural, social, political, economic, cultural. That order of God is immanent in the landscape. When progrowth coalitions like Daley’s tear down not just a church but an icehouse or a row of brick walkups to make room for an expressway or a housing project, they remove part of that God’s presence in the old neighborhood, soaked into its infrastructure.

So, in that sense, this is a scene about density—or, rather, a perceived erosion of density. There are two layers in play: a richly knowable, well-ordered past (figured by the remembered bells of St. Stephen’s, which resonated throughout the landscape), and a damaged, crippled present superimposed over it, a broken dispensation from which sense and meaning are draining out (figured by the mismatch between the present-day bells and the ruined landscape that no longer resonates with their message). That present does not add up to the coming of a new order; it is just the collapse of the old. If there is a new order on the way, it remains over the horizon, removed from Sophie’s understanding. Put that logic of decline together with the sacralization of neighborhood orders—the mystical presence of a particular God in the landscape—and the feeling of ultimacy and dread that supercharges the scene begins to be about urbanism and religion in a way that takes seriously the “urbanism” part of the equation.

Let us now turn back to “Blight” and Stuart Dybek, writing in the 1980s about a period that begins a decade after the action in *The Man with the Golden Arm*. In “Blight” the transformation of the Polish urban village is no longer just over the horizon; it is fully underway. “Blight” may begin like a baroque version of the decline, but it turns into a parody and finally a kind of requiem for the narrative of decline. “Blight” obviously is not a booster story, either. It is about developing a cultural tradition—an

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urbanism—that transcends decline and booster narrative in making itself equal to the task of figuring the inner city’s transformed social and cultural landscapes. The succession of orders gives shape to the decline and the booster story, but Dybek’s urban world takes shape in the overlap of orders. His characters have access to the industrial city’s persistent ghosts—“apparitions in broad daylight” of a peddler with horse and wagon, or a “mute knife sharpener pushing his screeching whetstone up alleys”—and at the same time they have access to the overlap of forms made available by the postindustrial city’s distinctive new arrangement of urban types and urban space.⁴

Dybek’s characters, like his Chicago stories, are syncretic—older orders in contraction make room for new material gathered by his characters from the layered social landscape in which they move. The play of persistence and succession opens the way for ecstatic experience, the search for which forms one of Dybek’s principal literary purposes.

That syncretic search for ecstatic experience voices a larger pattern within the post–World War II cultural history of Catholicism. The narrator, Dave, and his friends, born during and after the war, form a leading edge of what James T. Fisher has described as “a Catholic lost generation” that cobbled together its own cultural hybrid out of spare parts available to it.⁵ Dave and his friends are formed in the moment of transition between the constricting but reassuring immigrant-ethnic Catholicism of their parents or grandparents and a free-wheeling, if not free-falling, encounter with the opportunities for identity building made available by the postwar city: new contacts with black and Latino urbanisms, “Cold War Orientalism” in the form of beat-flavored Asian religiosity, a rich sense of living simultaneously in both the Old World (via the old neighborhood) and a new order in which, say, the music of John Coltrane or Son House could serve as a sacrament, too.⁶

Dave and his pals move along paths well-worn by working- and lower-middle-class members of Fisher’s Catholic lost generation: Deejo Decampo gives up plans to become a great novelist, and after a fling with beat poetry becomes a mediocre blues man instead; Stanley “Pepper” Rosado gives up the drums and joins the marines; Ziggy Zilinsky, tormented like Sophie Majcinek by end-times visions and finally unhinged by Fire Commissioner Quinn’s ill-advised decision to turn on the air-raid sirens when the White Sox won the pennant in 1959, sets out hitchhiking to Gethsemani and disappears from the neighborhood’s knowledge.

At the story’s end Dave is taking shelter from the draft in the late 1960s at a community college, where a professor nicknamed “The Spitter” has led him to believe that there is “blight all through Dickens and Blake” (69) and other great literature. The Spitter has a phony Oxford accent,

4. Stuart Dybek, “Nighthawks,” in *The Coast of Chicago*, 85.

5. On the Catholic “lost generation,” see James T. Fisher, “Clearing the Streets of the Catholic Lost Generation,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 93 (1994): 603–29.

6. I have borrowed the term “Cold War Orientalism” from Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

but the more excitedly he read and spit, the more I could detect the South Side of Chicago underneath the veneer, as if his th’s had been worked over with a drill press. When he read us Shelley’s ‘To a Skylark,’ which began ‘Hail to thee, blithe spirit’ [that is, *Hail ta dee, blight spirit*], I thought he was talking about blight again until I looked it up. (70)

Something about that class convinces Dave to take another look at the old neighborhood his family has left behind. (His parents have moved to Berwyn, an inner-ring suburb, and Dave has moved away too, presumably to the bohemian North Side.) Having taken the El back to the neighborhood and dropped into a tavern, where the Mexican songs on the jukebox sound suspiciously like polkas, Dave has a vision that rhymes with and revoices Sophie Majcinek’s:

I hadn’t been back for a couple of years. The neighborhood was mostly Mexican now, with many of the signs over the stores in Spanish, but the bars were still called the Edelweiss Tap and the Budweiser Lounge. Deejo and I had lost touch, but I heard that he’d been drafted. I made the rounds of some of the bars looking for his song on the jukeboxes, but when I couldn’t find it even in the Carta Blanca, where nothing else had changed, I gave up. I was sitting in the Carta Blanca having a last, cold *cerveza* before heading back, listening to “CuCuRuCuCu Paloma” on the jukebox and watching the sunlight streak in through the dusty wooden blinds. Then the jukebox stopped playing, and through the open door I could hear the bells from three different churches tolling the hour. They didn’t quite agree on the precise moment. Their rings overlapped and echoed one another. The streets were empty, no one home from work or school yet, and something about the overlapping of those bells made me remember how many times I’d had dreams, not prophetic ones like Ziggy’s, but terrifying all the same, in which I was back in my neighborhood, but lost, everything at once familiar and strange, and I knew if I tried to run, my feet would be like lead, and if I stepped off a curb, I’d drop through space, and then in the dream I would come to a corner that would feel so timeless and peaceful, like the Carta Blanca with the bells fading and the sunlight streaking through, that for a moment it would feel as if I’d wandered into an Official Blithe Area. (70–71)

Again, as in the passage from Algren’s *Golden Arm*, we encounter a flash of insight in which the landscape of the old neighborhood becomes charged with possibility—apocalyptic in Algren’s rendering, ultimately ecstatic in Dybek’s. The two sets of overlapping church bells, Algren’s and Dybek’s, ring one set of changes over which the two texts play very different melodic lines. Algren plays the definitive decline: the city done for with everyone in it. The overlapping bells in “Blight,” on the other hand, serve Dybek as a figure of the thickness and variety of urbanisms, and the ripeness of cultural opportunities, made available by the overlapping of old city and new.

Those opportunities include the literary. “Blight,” in the end, maps its own literary-historical moment in tracing the emergence of new kinds of inner-city stories written by urban intellectuals with distinctively postwar and postindustrial cultural training. Dave and his friends are all in some way artists—musicians, writers, visionaries—and

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Dave himself becomes an author-figure equipped to narrate the story itself. That closing passage finds the links between the old neighborhood and the community college classroom—the place where aspiring urban intellectuals of his generation can find Dickens, Blake, literature. Dave has equipped himself to do what Dybek does: to meld blithe and blight in tackling his generation's great urban subject, the fall of the old neighborhood and the rise of new cultural possibilities.

Dave finds his way via the classroom and the old neighborhood—rather than via being beaned with a fungo bat, as Ziggy was—to the experience of inner-city urbanism as a series of miraculous events that reveal how the postindustrial landscape brims with possibility. Winking saints, visions of the Blessed Virgin, the mystical omnipresence of Richard J. Daley, the sensation of ecstasy—all these signs and portents remind us that literary gold is lying around on the streets, waiting to be picked up by enterprising young people with syncretic tendencies.

The crucial scene at the story's climax makes explicit the principle of density that enables Dybek's model of a viable urbanism. If I were looking to make the reading as pat as possible, I would make the three sets of bells in Dybek into a trinity of past, present, and future urbanisms and orders of God, all sounding at once, densely coexisting in the landscape. And I would compare that to Algren's two sets of bells—just a past and a present (and their associated orders of God), but no future in view, which is in keeping with the logic of the hardcore decline. I will not try to make it so pat, but I will point out that both kinds of religious density are in play here, both the concentration of institutions (multiple churches, not quite in synch) and the layering and overlapping of various investments of religious feeling in the landscape (also not quite in synch, but occasionally striking an ecstatic chord that suggests a meta-order among layers—like the rancheras and the polkas on the jukebox in the bar, which occasionally sound just right when heard together in the mind's ear).

That brings me back to where I started: the intent to frame a reading of literature that takes both urbanism and religion into account. So I will stop here, but I want to give the last word to Stuart Dybek, so I will close with one of his early poems, entitled "To Acquire a Beautiful Body."⁷ I offer it without analytical epilogue, but as you read it attend to the ways in which the poem, in imagining the urban landscape, passes through the conceptual territory I have been considering: the play of persistence and succession, the presence of God and the saints in the cityscape, the fit between an urban self and the city's dense spiritual infrastructure, the productive tension between the blight of obsolete bodies or buildings and the ecstasy waiting around the corner or down the street in the dense overlap of past, present, and future urban orders:

7. Stuart Dybek, "To Acquire a Beautiful Body," in *Brass Knuckles* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1979), 63.

Live alone, in a room where the windows are painted stuck. Old salmon paint that reminds you of those who were beautiful when you were a child. They were still young when this paint was slapped creamy over dust. They saw streetcars in the traffic out the window. The war was over. Now you are as old. They seemed happier.

You’ll need a BEFORE. A concentration camp photo of a cousin that looked like you. Or someone fat. Here the resemblance needs to be less exact. Especially if it’s passport size and overexposed. You’ll realize light is as important as the body itself. Begin to experiment. Shawl your head with a towel after a bath. You’re only a blur in the steamy mirror, and the glow from the bare bathroom bulb shimmers about you like a halo.

Extra time can be spent visiting churches. Each day walk to one farther away. You won’t get lost—sooner or later you’ll come to a church and inside will be the same smell of the Middle Ages, their weather of cool plaster and smokey light. You’ll discover the past *can* be preserved if enclosed in a temple. Though the empty vestibules return you to modern times—cheap racks of free holy cards. Imagine the saints naked.

Knotted muscle in forearms. Biceps bulging. Neck tapers from shoulders with the grace of marble. Shoulders sculptured into a chest defined as armor. Stomach flat. Legs rippling power, planted on the floor as you continue to heave upward, fists knurled through handles, straining at the stuck window.

Finally it’s time to confront the mirror in a skin of natural daylight. The hottest August anyone can remember. Slick with sweat, bare, gazing at your body. Face no longer important, spirit inseparable.