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*Stuart Dybek and the New Chicago's Literature  
of Neighborhood*

*Carlo Rotella*

“The elephant was there, waiting, in the overgrown lot where once long ago there had been a Victory garden, and after that a billboard, but now nothing but the rusting hulks of abandoned cars.” So begins “Visions of Budhardin,” a story in *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods* (1986), the debut collection of Stuart Dybek, perhaps the greatest of Chicago’s many great neighborhood writers.<sup>1</sup> A pack of kids gather around the elephant, and soon they’re throwing things at it, carving initials into its hide, trying to set its tail on fire. It’s not so much an elephant as an elephant suit, and inside it, sitting on a stool and operating its legs and trunk with an assortment of levers and pulleys, is Budhardin, who grew up in the neighborhood and moved away long ago but has returned to the scene of formative sorrows and wonders. Lumbering with impossible agility through the streets, weeping real tears from his elephant-suit eyes, he raises painful memories and opens old wounds. The visit culminates in his half-destroying a church and being rolled onto a garbage scow by an angry mob, from which he is saved by a renegade choirboy who casts the scow adrift on the river. The story has the abstract feel of a parable or a Zen koan, and yet it is also startlingly concrete, grounded in the precisely described landscape of a certain kind of church-haunted Chicago neighborhood that used to be filled with Catholics from Eastern Europe and is now filled with Catholics from Mexico and points south. And for all its magical-realist strangeness it also feels strangely familiar, because going back to the neighborhood in which you grew up after a long time away can indeed make you feel elephantine: big with memories and emotion; protected but also suffocated by unwieldy layers of sentiment and experience; at once freakishly alien and also nostalgic for instantly recognized shapes marching trunk-to-tail out of the past.

“A city of neighborhoods.” “The old neighborhood.” “There goes the neighborhood.” Each of these much-used phrases is packed with meaning,

and yet each is also an invitation to settle into a cozy conceptual rut. We have to navigate past such ruts to engage Chicago's literature of neighborhood as more than a collection of well-worn clichés. The work itself shows us the way. The Victory garden, billboard, and rusted-out car hulks in the opening sentence of "Visions of Budhardin" carry us into the history of Dybek's neighborhood, Pilsen/Little Village: from World War II to the emergence of the postwar inner city in the age of suburbanization to its transformation in the era of urban renewal. These vast movements of people, money, and ideas opened up all sorts of literary possibilities – all sorts of opportunities to map the heartland of the city's imaginative life.

### **City of Neighborhoods**

Those who study Chicago, the most systematically and thoroughly studied of cities, have exercised an uncommonly deep effect on its neighborhoods. The city is still divided today into seventy-seven formally designated community areas that were originally mapped out more than a century ago by social scientists of the Chicago School. As part of their grand scheme to parse urban modernity, they broke up the city that was their laboratory into what they regarded as naturally occurring "ecological" units that had stable boundaries and displayed enduring characteristics, no matter who happened to live there. These community areas do not often correspond to wards or police districts or other administrative sectioning of the city, but decades of reference to them in policy, planning, data gathering, and business activity – as well as everyday conversation – has given them a lasting authority and social purchase. Government officials and scholars and businesses and residents use the Chicago School's community areas in practical as well as imaginative ways to organize the city.

Chicago was the shock city of the industrial age, a place where the urban future was widely understood to be taking form with a speed and dynamism that attracted attention from around the world. From the late nineteenth century until well into the first half of the twentieth, Chicago writing of many kinds – social science, fiction, poetry, journalism – enjoyed an international reputation as a composite account of human experience on the cutting edge of history. The Chicago-associated writers H. L. Mencken had in mind when in 1917 he declared Chicago the emerging literary capital of America included Henry Blake Fuller, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Robert Herrick, and Joseph Medill Patterson, all of whose work he saw as enacting principal literary and cultural dramas of the era: urbanization, industrialization, and

immigration; the eclipse of the genteel tradition as the middle and lower classes became the dominant sources of literary language and subject matter; the westering of the acknowledged wellsprings of American culture; the various forms of traffic between the hinterland that produced raw materials and the metropolis that produced finished goods.

A subsequent wave of writers took up the representation of the industrial city at street level. James T. Farrell was Chicago's most celebrated neighborhood writer of the 1930s on the strength of his Studs Lonigan trilogy (*Young Lonigan*, 1932; *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan*, 1934; *Judgment Day*, 1935); Richard Wright (*Native Son*, 1940) and Nelson Algren (*Never Come Morning*, 1942; *The Neon Wilderness*, 1947; *The Man with the Golden Arm*, 1949) succeeded him in the 1940s; and the poet Gwendolyn Brooks made a grand entrance with *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) and *Annie Allen* (1949), for which she received the Pulitzer Prize.

Algren and Brooks represent the apogee of the industrial neighborhood literature. Algren's hallucinatorily intense portraits of the Milwaukee Avenue corridor on the Near Northwest Side depict the hustlers, fixers, strivers, and working-class heroes of the immigrant-ethnic urban village in its late heyday. On the one hand, this world feels fully developed, monolithic, established: "That was the way things were because that was how things had always been. Which was why they could never be any different. Neither God, war, nor the ward super could work any deep change on West Division Street." On the other hand, the characters in *The Man with the Golden Arm* feel change encroaching, a premonition of doom that ranges from the vaguest sense of imminence ("everyone had become afraid of closing time everywhere, of having the lights go out in the middle of the dance while the chimes of the churches mourned") to the most particularistic postwar concern about racial succession ("the spades are movin' in it's gettin' smokier every day").<sup>2</sup>

Brooks's poetry maps Bronzeville, the center of Chicago's Black Metropolis, in the moment when the second wave of the great migration from the South filled it to bursting and the city's Black population began to expand into other neighborhoods on the South Side and West Side. "Kitchenette Building," "The Vacant Lot," and other such poems explicitly consider the literary possibilities of the Black Metropolis as a subject, often marrying mundane details of African American neighborhood life to traditional forms like the sonnet and ballad. "Southeast Corner" begins with a change in the local landscape: a tavern has replaced the School of Beauty, the proprietor of which has relocated to Lincoln Cemetery, where her fortune has been converted into an imposing monument and a steel

coffin lined with red velvet. The final lines – “While over her tan impassivity / Shot silk is shining” – fairly pulse with propriety, futility, and a sense of all that goes on beneath the surface of mundane neighborhood vistas. Another cemetery-bound poem, “Of De Witt Williams on His Way to Lincoln Cemetery,” follows a hearse bearing the title character’s body “Down through Forty-Seventh Street: / Underneath the El” as it plots the tension between the “plain black boy[’s]” truncated life and the expansive aspirations and possibilities it projects onto the sweep of Black migration stretching from Alabama to Bronzeville.<sup>3</sup>

By the middle of the twentieth century, the notion of Chicago as a cultural forge producing serial iterations of the next big literary thing was already beginning to fade along with the novelty of the industrial city, which had begun to show signs of aging out. While Algren was regarded as part of a tradition stretching back to Dreiser, and his later works increasingly received as obsolescent throwbacks to a fading era, Brooks was received as a major Black poet rather than just as the next Chicago writer. Her later work would move away from Bronzeville portraits to sketch Blackstone Rangers gang members, sisters who have kept their naturals, and other types characteristic of urban orders that emerged in the 1960s. Not only were stylistic tastes and literary-historical narratives changing but also the neighborhoods that Algren and Brooks and the others had taken as primary subject matter were being transformed.

### **Neighborhood Orders in Motion**

As one of the nation’s and the world’s leading exemplars of industrial urbanism, Chicago was unsettled with special force by shifts in the form and function of the American city that occurred in the decades after World War II. The industrial city began to age out in earnest, with manufacturing jobs departing northern inner cities to relocate in the suburbs, southern states, and other countries. The postindustrial metropolis, primarily organized not around turning raw materials into finished products but around handling information and providing services, rose around and through the receding industrial city. The emerging order’s distinctive forms – highways and airports rather than rail lines and port facilities, steel-and-glass office towers rather than redbrick factories, high-rise housing rather than tenements or bungalows – layered over earlier cityscapes. Government policies pushed the process via urban renewal initiatives like slum clearance and the construction of monumental housing projects, and by fostering suburban growth with highway construction and loan practices encouraging home

ownership. These policies heightened the effects of the interlocking folk migrations to mid-century America's two promised lands: the movement of African Americans from the rural South (and Spanish-speaking migrants from Latin America) to the inner city, and the outflow of white city dwellers to the booming suburban periphery. The middle class grew at first, filling Chicago's bungalow belt with newly prosperous and upwardly mobile families, but then it began to shrink as the hourglass shape of the postindustrial labor market became increasingly pronounced: educated haves on top, contingent have-nots below, the wasp waist of a contracting middle between them.

Such transformations made for new layers of neighborhood order. In Chicago, the signature form of the "second ghetto" that replaced the old Black Metropolis on the South Side and West Side was the cluster of housing project towers, like the Robert Taylor Homes or Cabrini-Green Homes. The postwar *barrio* (Pilsen/Little Village, Humboldt Park) was fed by fresh migrations from Mexico, Central America, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic, part of a larger influx that also brought fresh streams of immigrants from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Caribbean. Professional and neobohehian districts (Hyde Park, much of the North Side, and in time the Milwaukee Avenue corridor and formerly marginal areas around the Loop) expanded to accommodate the city's growing numbers of college-educated knowledge workers. White-ethnic enclaves like Bridgeport or Marquette Park, fortified remnants of the urban village no longer embedded in a patchwork of similarly Old World-derived neighborhoods, became emblems of resilience and atavism. And the suburbs grew with such speed that by the 1970s they had reconfigured the concept of the region. "Chicagoland" originally referred to the manufacturing city and its raw-material-producing hinterland, but came to be used to describe the suburbanized metro area, which extends west far into corn country, south into Indiana, and north into Wisconsin.

All these converging and intertwining factors contributed to the long, gradual emergence of what has been called the New Chicago, which brought on a similarly extended, multivalent crisis and boom in the writing of the city's neighborhoods. As canonical renderings of the old Chicago – chief among them Carl Sandburg's endlessly rehashed "City of the Big Shoulders" – increasingly came to feel like nostalgic straitjackets constraining the literary imagination, neighborhood writers felt compelled and inspired to try new things, tell new stories, and repurpose or revalue old ones.

**Stuart Dybek**

Stuart Dybek, the dean of the New Chicago's writers, has over the course of his long career drawn steadily on the bottomless well of his experience of growing up in Pilsen/Little Village in the postwar era. Born in 1942, he began publishing in the 1970s and is still active at this writing. His body of work to date consists of five books of short stories and two of poetry, and they have won honors and accolades from every quarter, including a MacArthur Fellowship and the claim in the *New York Times Book Review* in 2014 that "he is not only our most relevant writer, but maybe our best" – not the best Chicago neighborhood writer or Chicago writer, but the best American writer, period.<sup>4</sup>

Dybek has rendered Pilsen/Little Village with a vividness and depth that turns it into a literary place on a par with Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Elena Ferrante's Rione Luzzatti, or J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth. A formerly industrial area southwest of the Loop where residents with roots in Bohemia, Poland, and other Eastern European places gave way in the 1950s and 1960s to those with roots in Mexico and Central America, Pilsen/Little Village is home to the city's liveliest Spanish-speaking shopping district and also to the Cook County Department of Corrections's main holding tank for arrestees. Dybek's characters move through a neighborhood that presents them with "apparitions in broad daylight" of an older city: horse-and-wagon peddlers, bridges and trestles encased in decades of pigeon droppings, defunct factories and ice houses, and other buildings of increasingly mysterious function, aging relatives from the Old Country imbued with semi-fabulous attributes. But the neighborhood also confronts them with newcomers, new ways of doing things, disorientingly new notions of beauty and efficacy and purpose.<sup>5</sup>

Dybek has been called a magical realist, and his work sometimes does blend acutely observed realism and lyrical fantasy with the deadpan matter-of-factness characteristic of that genre, as in his account of Budhardin's adventures in the elephant suit. If so, the comparison to Latin American magical realism is instructive. Gabriel García Márquez, Alejo Carpentier, and other exemplars of the form fashioned it in part to depict the encounter of postcolonial societies with American-style industrialization as it drove south in waves from the United States, spearheaded by the United Fruit Company and other such extractive enterprises. Dybek's magical realism arises at the back edge of that process, the departure of industrial urbanism from one of its capital cities and the emergence of postindustrial urbanism in its wake. Apparitional encounters with winking statues and

visions of Mayor Daley (the First) as a Shiva-like destroyer of cities, like encounters with Spanish galleons in the jungle and streams of blood that flow with supernatural purposefulness through the streets of Macondo, occur precisely in the zone of overlap between receding and emergent orders.

Moving through that zone can be disorienting – terrifying, thrilling, weird. Marzek, the narrator of “Sauerkraut Soup,” is walking down the grass strip in the middle of Western Avenue at sunset when he’s overtaken by “one of those moments when the ordinariness is suddenly stripped away and you feel yourself teetering between futures.” He does not want to end up working in a factory like his father and other older immigrant men in the neighborhood, and he feels drawn to art and the life of the mind in the form of Beethoven’s “Ghost Trio,” the works of Shakespeare, and a Van Gogh self-portrait at the Art Institute downtown, but he is having trouble figuring out how to navigate between possible life courses. The dissonance drops him in his tracks:

I sat down in the grass and lowered my head, trying to clear the spots from my eyes . . . The flaring light slanted orange along the brick walls in a way that made them appear two-dimensional, faked. The sky looked phony too, flat clouds like cutouts pasted on rather than floating. It looked possible to reach up and touch the sky, and poke a finger through.<sup>6</sup>

One typical resolution of this conflict, in Dybek’s stories, is to make art out of the materials offered by the neighborhood. The richness of literary possibilities opened up by the mutating city constitutes one of Dybek’s recurring themes, an overarching meta-theme. Like Dybek himself, his characters cobble together syncretic cultural hybrids out of spare parts made available to them by the immigrant-ethnic church and other Old World-derived traditions; African American urbanisms of the kind that produced bebop, electric blues, and rock and roll; Hispanic urbanisms that take forms ranging from a bilingual kiss-off to a clueless swain “written in angry slashes of eyebrow pencil” (“*¡Lechon! !!Estúpido!! ¡Pervert!*”) to ranchera songs on the jukeboxes of formerly Polish bars that sound suspiciously like the polkas and waltzes they have replaced; and creative resources on offer not only in their changing neighborhood but also in the wider world: classical music drifting down the airshaft from a neighboring apartment, paintings at the Art Institute, Shelley and Dickens and other canonical literature on offer in community college classrooms.<sup>7</sup> This host of potential influences helps constitute the soup of identity-making in which his characters swim.



“Blight,” one of Dybek’s best-known stories, tells the meta-tale of how its narrator, a neighborhood guy named Dave, assembles the equipment to narrate the story’s account of his friends and their changing neighborhood “during those years between Korea and Vietnam, when rock and roll was being perfected.” Dave’s moment of heightened consciousness comes on a visit to the old neighborhood, when he hears through the open door of a neighborhood bar the bells of three different churches tolling in overlapping non-unison and is reminded of dreams in which he is lost and alone in the old neighborhood, “everything at once familiar and strange.”<sup>8</sup> Terror gives way to a sense of timeless peace as Dave finally realizes who he is: the guy who can tell this story. Like so many of Dybek’s characters, he puts together the pieces of himself as he puts together the wherewithal to narrate neighborhood stories that do justice to the New Chicago.

### South Shore

The Chicago novel of the moment in the spring of 2020 was Gabriel Bump’s *Everywhere You Don’t Belong* (2020), a widely lauded coming-of-age story about a young Black man from South Shore, a neighborhood of bungalow blocks, walk-up apartment buildings, and desolate commercial strips on the lakefront south of Jackson Park. When asked about his inspirations for writing about South Shore, where he grew up, Bump unflinchingly cites Dybek, whose work he first read as an undergraduate. For instance, when interviewed by *Chicago* magazine, Bump said:

I was reading *Coast of Chicago*, and particularly ‘Blight’ stuck out to me. I wondered why there weren’t short stories like Dybek’s portrayal of Pilsen . . . for the South Side. So I tried to write them. My stories were about the South Side and characters were black kids falling in love and dealing with problems at school or home. The novel grew out of that.<sup>9</sup>

As much as *Everywhere You Don’t Belong* owes to Dybek’s example of how to tell a neighborhood story, it was also shaped by South Shore itself. Officially designated community area number 43, South Shore is nine miles south of the Loop and bounded by Lake Michigan on the east, Jackson Park on the north, Stony Island Avenue on the west, and 79th Street on the south. Its population of about 50,000, down from a high of 80,000, is over 95 percent African American, and above the city’s average in numbers of both high school dropouts and PhDs. Because middle-class homeowners have traditionally dominated South Shore’s public life, the shrinking and aging of that middle class has left the neighborhood

increasingly split between haves and have-nots who find it hard to recognize each other as neighbors and get together to solve problems. More than a third of residents are below the poverty line, and South Shore ranks among the worst quarter of Chicago's community areas in measures of violent crime; residents with choices avoid sending their kids to its schools; commercial streets have a lot of vacant storefronts, marginal businesses, and unemployed hangers-out; and in recent years South Shore has led the city in housing vouchers and evictions. But it has also long been known as one of the most attractive parts of the South Side, blessed with over 1,000 historic Chicago bungalows and other fine housing stock, lovely parks and beaches, convenient public transportation, and a long-established reputation for respectability.

Not much appears to be happening at any given moment in South Shore. The streets are often empty, and there is not much sense of action except on certain hot corners or blocks. But one lesson of more general application that South Shore teaches is that even though a neighborhood may feel solid – mundane, knowable, even boring – it is also always in motion underfoot, with older orders rising and falling and piling up in layers through which succeeding newer orders are already emerging. South Shore has a history of successions that goes all the way back to Miami and then Potawatomi villages, camps, and chipping stations on the prairie amid swampy low ground and wooded ridges. Then came German truck farmers in the late nineteenth century, English railroad workers in the early twentieth century, and Irish and then Jewish immigrant families moving up into the American middle class in the mid-twentieth century. Then the Black middle class arrived in the 1960s, followed shortly thereafter by the Black working class and poor, and (residents say) by a notional wave of white yuppies or hipsters whose imminent arrival has been predicted for the past half-century but who so far have not arrived in force.

The literature of South Shore exploits the storytelling possibilities opened up by the neighborhood's history, and sometimes even appears to anticipate it. There is a police shooting and riot in *Everywhere You Don't Belong* that Bump wrote well before the shooting of an armed man named Harith Augustus by a police officer on 71st Street in the heart of South Shore in 2018 led to protests and police responses, a volatile situation that at times turned violent. The novel seems to predict those events, though it is more accurate to say that Bump observed social conditions in South Shore, which include high rates of unemployment and low rates of school completion, a robust street hangout culture, and a tense relationship between police and some of the neighborhood's have-nots.

We can trace other such historical resonances in the literature of South Shore. For instance, the hollowing out of the middle class to produce the signature hourglass shape of the New Chicago's postindustrial labor market leaves an imprint on Bayo Ojikutu's *Free Burning*. In one pivotal scene, the novel's protagonist, Tommie Simms, travels eastbound on 71st through the heart of South Shore – and right over the spot in the street where Harith Augustus would be shot by police – in pursuit of his mother. She is on foot, he is in a car; desperate in their separate but linked ways, they are unable to do much of anything for each other. Tommie is a midlevel office worker who gets yanked out of his information-handling gig at an insurance company in a downtown skyscraper and into the drug-dealing street life in South Shore. It's "last hired, first fired" again – not only as a service worker but also as a member of the shrinking middle class. His mother, who used to work on the line in a Ford plant farther out on the South Side, has been reduced to a marginal state somewhere between barfly and bag lady. It is getting harder for both generations, the mother who once embodied industrial-era upward mobility and the son who once embodied the postindustrial version, to hold on to the middle-class status they temporarily achieved. *Free Burning* was written in 2002–04 and published in 2006 but reads like a primer on what would shortly be coming in the recession brought on by the housing bust of 2008, which hit African American neighborhoods like South Shore with disproportionately severe effect. The novel is haunted by the Black bourgeoisie's fear of being pushed back into second-class citizenship by institutional racism and also pulled back to it by underclass neighbors of the kind who draw Tommie into the street life.

The poets Nate Marshall and José Olivarez have roomed together in recent years in a house on the 7700 block of South Paxton. From that South Shore redoubt, Marshall looks farther south to the area of the city known as the Wild Hundreds, turning the stuff of neighborhood into poetry as Brooks did with Bronzeville: a walk past a vacant lot to a liquor store, a portrait of a grandfather who "moved deep South Side in the sixties / when whitefolk was still there," a paean to the ubiquitous local chain of Harold's Fried Chicken Shacks: "every cut of crow you / throw in the grease is dark / meat."<sup>10</sup> Olivarez, for his part, makes poetry out of Mexican American immigrant experience ("My Parents Fold Like Luggage"), Calumet City house parties, and other features of the twenty-first-century South Side. In an essay, Olivarez catches the characteristic South Side feel of their block, solid and proper beneath the crackle of the area's reputation for violence. He notes that Uber drivers who take him

home see a Mexican on the Black South Side and ask him if he's sure he knows where he's going, if he's going to be okay, but "in the evening, when I walk home from the bus stop, it's quiet. No one is outside. The trees keep me company. Our neighbors care about how our block looks. All of the lawns are neat except ours."<sup>11</sup>

Kanye West and Michelle Obama both grew up in South Shore, to which they return in song and memoir. They are paragons of the upward mobility that the neighborhood used to represent, though a closer look at their life stories shows that their families had to maneuver around the waning of South Shore's ability to offer such opportunities. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Michelle Robinson attended Whitney Young, the city's first magnet high school, and not South Shore High, which had already begun to sink in reputation and would have been much less likely to get her to Princeton. And West's mother moved herself and her son out of the neighborhood after somebody tried to steal his bike. A successor generation of younger South Shore hip-hop artists, led by the gun-crazy drill rappers G Herbo and Lil Bibby, made their bones by dwelling on the neighborhood's reputation for violence. In their songs, upward mobility has become something far less gradual and prosocial and more like the random lightning strike of viral celebrity: one guy blows up huge, everybody else ends up on the corner or dead.

The Marvel comic book heroine Ironheart – a young successor to Iron Man whose adventures are written by, among others, the poet and University of Chicago professor Eve Ewing – grew up in South Shore. She is Riri Williams, a badass Afro-futurist prodigy who tinkered in her garage before moving on to MIT at an impossibly tender age. The split nature of her background – bourgeois family values and a garage to tinker in, but also random gun violence that provided the ur-impulse for Riri's crimefighting by claiming her father, stepfather, and best friend – neatly reproduces twenty-first century South Shore's divided identity as both traditional bungalow haven and notorious crime zone.

Peeling back the onion-skin layers of succession, we can also see how South Shore stories represent earlier phases of the neighborhood's history. David Mamet's play *The Old Neighborhood* (which opened on Broadway in 1997) is both an example and a parody of white flight narrative. In it, a fortyish man named Bobby returns to Chicago and visits with family and friends. Their seemingly tangential talk about the usual Mamet subjects – like who was or was not a fag, or why their parents hated them – keeps circling back to the topography and meaning of the old neighborhood left behind long ago by their families, which is Jewish South Shore. Mamet,

born in 1947, lived on the 6900 block of Euclid, across the street and down a few doors from the house in which Gabriel Bump would grow up. Looking back at the inner city over a widening gap of social distance and decades, Mamet's characters see ruin in their wake, as if South Shore had been annihilated like Pompeii by a volcanic eruption rather than continuing on as a place much like the one they left, except that the bungalow owners scrupulously trimming the lawns are now Black. "Oh, Bobby, it's all gone," says one of them. "It's all gone there. You knew that."<sup>12</sup>

*The Old Neighborhood* stands out as a rare satire in the overwhelmingly earnest canon of white flight narratives, an Old Neighborhood literature that also includes Caryn Lazar Amster's memoir *The Pied Piper of South Shore* and a large body of similarly nostalgic and regretful first-person accounts, many of them self-published. Looking beyond South Shore to other South Side neighborhoods that experienced similar transitions in the 1960s and 1970s, the genre includes Louis Rosen's semi-non-fictional *The South Side*; Ray Hanania's *Midnight Flight*; C. J. Martello's long-running "Petals from Roseland" column in *Fra Noi*, Chicago's Italian American magazine; the prog-rock band Styx's triple-platinum concept album *Paradise Theatre*, an operatic suite about the destruction in 1956 of the Paradise – a sister venue to South Shore's Avalon, both of which were the work of the architect John Ebersson – in West Garfield Park; and Alan Ehrenhalt's *The Lost City*, a historical paean to Chicago in the 1950s, especially its urban villages. Mamet understands that these laments are stories about the sorrows of making it in America, about the cost of moving not just out but up, and he accordingly treats the longing for the Old Neighborhood as the stuff of farce more than tragedy, more *The Sopranos* than *The Godfather*.

The suspicion that the urban villagers gave up too easily on their supposed paradise lingers as an undercurrent of bad faith beneath the characteristic rosiness of the Old Neighborhood narrative's view of the distant past. If everything was really so perfect back in the day, why did the villagers bolt at the sight of the first few Black or brown neighbors? All the sentiment that flows through such stories tends to obscure the hard social-historical fact that they were already on their way out of this lost city anyway, no matter how much they idealize it in memory or blame block-busting speculators, spineless neighbors, gangs, muggers, junkies, or other villains for driving them out. As the industrial city came to the end of its run and the suburbanized postindustrial metropolis emerged to replace it, the logic of upward mobility in mid-century America increasingly led outward. Tallying up what was lost and downplaying what was gained in

the move, the Old Neighborhood narrative looks back to an idealized urban moment that Amster and other authors of Jewish and Irish South Shore's self-published white flight narratives call "Camelot" with a mix of irony and genuine longing.

Much as succession and change has been the rule in the history and literature of Chicago's neighborhoods, there's plenty of persistence as well. We can discern continuities with the present even if we go all the way back to Farrell's Studs Lonigan trilogy, published in the 1930s. Studs lives in the heart of South Shore, on Jeffery Boulevard just south of 71st Street, and he runs with an Irish crew of the kind to which Richard J. Daley belonged in his youth, forerunners of the Four Corner Hustlers, No Limit Muskegon Boyz, and other latter-day gangs of Black South Shore. A scrappy, doomed exemplar of the South Side Irish, Studs resembles Ojikutu's Tommie Simms in the sense that the effects of the Great Depression reveal his family's upward mobility to be a temporary illusion, even back in the days when upward mobility was the norm in South Shore. Broke, broken, and mortally sick at the end of *Judgment Day*, the last of the trilogy, Studs staggers off the Illinois Central commuter train at Bryn Mawr station at 71st and Jeffery and drags himself down the block toward his deathbed. Tommie Simms will cross the very same stretch of pavement as he passes through that intersection in pursuit of his mother seven decades later.

### The Neighborhood Literature of Chicago

Consider the foregoing just a sample of literary South Shore, and by no means a comprehensive survey. And bear in mind that South Shore is just one community area, and not one even known particularly as a hotbed of literary production. It plays an unassuming, out-of-the-way role in most accounts of the city's writing life, which tend to feature neighborhoods like the Hyde Park of Philip Roth and Saul Bellow, the Bronzeville of Brooks and Wright, the Pilsen of Sandra Cisneros and Dybek, the Wicker Park of Algren and *High Fidelity*. Diving deep beneath the surface of clichés like "a city of neighborhoods," "the old neighborhood," and "there goes the neighborhood," one could perform such case studies of Chicago's neighborhood literature – at least seventy-seven of them, in fact – for a long, long time without ever reaching bottom. That's because, in the end, "neighborhood writer" and "neighborhood literature" are no more than artificial heuristics, a convenient way of dividing up Chicago writing and framing its relationship to the city itself. The literature of Chicago's neighborhoods is the literature of Chicago.<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

1. Stuart Dybek, *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods* (New York: Ecco, 1986), 69.
2. Nelson Algren, *The Man with the Golden Arm* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990), 7, 97, 26.
3. Gwendolyn Brooks, *Blacks* (Chicago: David, 1987), 23, 39.
4. Darin Strauss, "What the Hearts Want," *New York Times*, August 1, 2014, 22.
5. Stuart Dybek, *The Coast of Chicago* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 85.
6. Dybek, *Childhood*, 131–32.
7. Dybek, *Coast of Chicago*, 53.
8. Dybek, *Coast of Chicago*, 71.
9. Elly Fishman, "Gabriel Bump's Debut Novel Pays Homage to South Shore," *Chicago*, February 13, 2020, [www.chicagomag.com/arts-culture/February-2020/Gabriel-Bumps-Debut-Novel-Pays-Homage-to-South-Shore/](http://www.chicagomag.com/arts-culture/February-2020/Gabriel-Bumps-Debut-Novel-Pays-Homage-to-South-Shore/).
10. Nate Marshall, *Wild Hundreds* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 8, 7.
11. José Olivarez, "Five Truths and a Lie About Paxton Avenue," *Chicago*, October 29, 2018, [www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/November-2018/12-Blocks/Jose-Olivarez/](http://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/November-2018/12-Blocks/Jose-Olivarez/).
12. David Mamet, *The Old Neighborhood* (New York: Random House, 1999), 29.
13. For more on the literature of Chicago and the city's postindustrial transformation, see Carlo Rotella, *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature* (Berkeley: University of California, 1997), especially 1–115. For more on South Shore and its literature, see Carlo Rotella, *The World Is Always Coming to an End: Pulling Together and Apart in a Chicago Neighborhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019). Portions of this chapter have been adapted from those sources.