

Chain Links

1

Most of us were good hillbilly stock,
first generation born north of the line
though my mother, who said our tree
had a slave owner in Virginia named Humphries
and later in Wolf's Pen an Indian woman
she called Grandmother whose broad lap
she slept on when she was a little girl,
also said some of us were just trash.

Others in the neighborhood, who always seemed
a little better off, and smarter in school,
the first on the block with black and white TV,
had grandparents who wore babushkas
and small-billed caps and spoke a language
the rest of us didn't understand
from a place they always called *the old country*.

2

After the divorce, my mother, brother and I
lived in her mother's four-apartment duplex.
Across Vermont St. was St. Vincent's
yellow-brick hospital. Down the block
to the right was St. Anthony's Church, to the left,
St. Anthony's convent and orphanage,
a red-brick building two or three stories high
over a block long with an open field
at the back that faced our street. Around the field
with its teetertotters, swings and monkey bars.
was a ten-foot high chainlink fence.

The kids and nuns inside for the most part
ignored us and we mostly returned the favor
but sometimes they reminded me of years before
when we would go for Sunday drives and picnics
out along the shore of Lake Erie,
where there was another field with a tall
chainlink fence and not kids and nuns behind it
but men, all dressed in what seemed to me
like gray striped pajamas, all just standing around
except for a few, by the fence, watching us drive by.

When I asked my father who they were he said

prisoners of war and how he said it
made me not ask what that meant
though I wondered why they all just stood there
not talking to each other or doing anything
but just standing there as we drove by
with him at the wheel, her in the passenger seat,
me and my brother and sometimes the dog
in back, all three of us tired of just sitting.