

Four Poems About New Haven

Susan Holahan

Real Estate

Two weeks after the Berlin Wall went up I looked for a place in New Haven. From a classified ad I picked 23 1/2 Dixwell Ave. The “1/2” I liked. “Dixwell Ave.” didn’t mean. A woman from college would split the rent. I set a scarred-white-enamel-top table from Goodwill in the center of the kitchen and cockroaches dashed across the floor. Frantic, I started spraying. The belly of one big black cockroach burst! Baby cockroaches spilled out! Dirty ivory. Fully formed. You could count the legs (fast!). Gaping I sprayed and sprayed. Once you’re killing you keep killing, even tiny perfect cockroach babies that run at “birth” I killed fast as I could, swept them up without worrying about covering the broom with spray then scrubbed the floor without thinking POISON on the brush. Soon the couple from downstairs who’d be tight with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party later were refusing mayonnaise at the same kitchen table and my roommate’s Brazilian-Marxist boyfriend was haranguing me about “the cash nexus” in Jane Austen. The kid who pretended in junior high he’d found this gold ID bracelet with my name on it on the sidewalk outside school so I had to take it from him was doing first-year law up in Cambridge where one night we did nothing but wrangle about would we *fall*—his language—*into the rack* right away or was I dressed enough for the dinner he wanted to eat so I slammed out of his dorm room around midnight. The Greyhound pulled in after city buses stopped then a cabbie dropped me on Dixwell hot-potato style. Upstairs my room reeked and my roommate’s friend was sleeping in my bed, roommate and boyfriend spread out in the living room. I half-woke the friend, who refused to move. That was my anti-political period: I was thrilled by the pattern emerging in the linoleum when I scrubbed the kitchen floor: I was happy watching rice boil in a Pyrex pot. My roommate’s friend dropped back into sleep like a safe heaved from a second-story window and I

didn't know what to do with myself—cold dawn in a kitchen dotted with dinner leavings—any more than I know what the poem needs here or how this is a poem. If. Late in the year there I had to disclose my address and the guy facing me said, *Yeah, the white girls. With no curtains*. Wherever I phoned that first day about the classifieds someone would ask, *Are you white?* Angry, I'd hesitate. Yes ... but why.... I needed a place to live and I didn't think: glass-bubble days. I figured it was my funny accent they meant.

History

At the pizza joint next to the bookstore gone equally long. late October sun hit the storefront the way white space hits margins. No room to turn between the counter and the row of table-ettes and no escaping the radio, which the counterwoman, alone inside, had on LOUD when the door opened. A tall, early-balding guy in a "blazer" stopped the woman with him—chattering, she was conducting a Relationship, she had a lot to get across, and he HALTED her. She should have twigged then: he needed to hear the radio. She Closed Down. Nevertheless, turned to the counter, they handle a slice or two while he listens. She could be counting anapests. *If the sky is planning to fall*, she'd tell a party, *let it surprise me*. They eat up; he pays; they walk a few blocks, touching hips. Does he mention the radio's news? Before we know it they're in her attic messing around on a studio couch so overbuilt it could play Elephant in the Room where there's ROOM. No one mentions current events now. The music is "cool" jazz; garlic from the pizza they both breathe. They're joking. Shall we take this into the bedroom, while you're drawing me into conversation about the light switch over the stairs and he Suddenly Remembers he's Engaged! —wondering privately why SHE ever agreed to marry him or what the desks he huddled under in grade school can do for him now? He's ENGAGED, he's gone. The talky woman might weep but this is prose and he's already down the stairs. SHE as it happened later

left him and their child—ignore the stories about motorcycles and substance abuse: we all had hectic moments—produced books like anyone else and didn't die until she'd had time for another marriage much longer than STOP The woman "from" the pizza joint latched onto the eyeball-to-eyeball part, not the blinking. [Credit Dean Rusk in a footnote?] She rushed from her attic into a first marriage without much idea whose story it was, then, **then** she learned to blink. Any story has at least two things going on. Once she learned to call her disappointment the Cuban Missile Crisis, the studio couch simply lost its color. She tried other stories. First let go of this one that hasn't settled any more than she has.

Politics

Mondays, dogshit—the prospect of, the THREAT of—hangs around like the mote you grope for in your eye all day. By the time the city recycle truck churns north and the sanitation engineers hop down to fling blue boxes around, will alien dogshit be lurking in our trash barrel or lying on our front snow? (CORRECTION: Sanitation Engineers exclusively garbage men? Therefore 'recycle guys' = Solid-Waste-Management Technicians?) When the garbage truck is late the tall blue city trash barrels stand by the curb past sunrise next to the blue recycle boxes, undisturbed. Time enough for an owner of dogshit to drop his (*his?*—surely as many female early dog-walkers on this street as male? Plan to count.) plastic bag into our barrel (WHY US? What did we do?

Every Monday morning one dog stops for a crap here and the person on the other end of the leash stoops with one hand inside a plastic bag, grabs up the turds, yanks the bag back around them, flips the lid of our trash barrel, shoots the bag inside and WALKS ON?) (*Parentheses out of control? Already?*) DESPITE the sign on the cover encouraging "them" to carry "their" dog's shit back home but every other day all the way home this is a model shit-bear-

ing citizen? The day you taped my sign right above the handle so s/he'd spot it as s/he hoisted the lid to slip her/his shit in, a mound of dogshit shone in the middle of our front crabgrass. Now more dogshit than ever lies unscooped all over the nabe: an organized protest nobody tipped us a wink to because We Don't Have a Dog?

[BOX—like a stone hurled through a window]

GET A LIFE IF YOU CAN'T GET A DOG! You don't know shit in this town! They passed a law requiring dog owners to scoop but I walk miles behind my dog dangling a bag of shit before a Municipal Trash Basket turns up! Dogs do you a favor by existing! Take in your neighbor's dogshit and be grateful!

I feel terrible. I feel so bad I don't know what to feel. We walk each other and we don't pet strangers. We offer hellos promiscuously, not slighting squirrels. Every minute we're on the lookout for Rules to follow. You'd never work all this trouble inside line-breaks where the Rule is, *No parentheses*.

Home

Find out if the baby needs a ride to the emergency room this morning. It's good we landed so close. On Young Street I slept on a mattress on the floor. The baby's father was in grade school. One night I came home alone. A tall man in the shadows beyond the doors—and my hand started shaking so I couldn't get my key in the lock. He said it was OK he was a friend of upstairs but my hand kept shaking, shaking

long after I stumbled inside. The burglars who cleaned the place out the next summer when I left a window open on a hot night I never saw. At first light the windshields of cars parked on the street gleam with ice that's opaque. It's COLD to write when the baby might be in trouble. The tall man who walks a honey-colored dog like a shawl with skinny feet slips and recovers, slips and recovers. Every day you feel too sad for metaphor is not writer's block.

One afternoon a week I walk with a woman who greets everyone we pass. All these years she's lived up the street, next door to where her ex-husband ran a commune back when Westville was chock-a-block with communes and tall, bearded guys running them. She'd hang out, angling for the attention of a steely blond who sat, hot nights, around the (second-floor) porch naked—on Principle. I lived downstairs. This nice woman hoped but he chose mean so we fought, he and I, all the way from communes to apartments, from I was doing checkout in the food coop between daycare shifts and he was driving a taxi to I was editing an old small-city daily east of here and he was—teaching in a private high school? Until he said *You'll never find anyone smarter* and I figured what does he know, blanched his brain with karate. This woman I walk with who used to hang out lives alone, with friends downstairs, kids far away. We never mention that man. Don't remind me not to tell anyone how worried I am every day about the baby. I expected only one “you” in this poem and that “you” wasn't “me.” Su Tung-po's game: he'd play a messy old crazy poet in the marketplace to pretend he belonged where he was stuck. Behind his clamor he came to suspect he couldn't get home if he tried. Two women running south now in the right lane. Not jogging, running, ice or no ice. *Yes!*, I whisper. *Bright shirts!* You never don't worry about a baby. And I go on too long but you want someone to hear you.