After Getting the Mail

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After Getting the Mail

Howard Schaap

We approach the house at the elbow-bend of the one-way, the boys in the steel-spoked stroller and me pushing. The house lies vacant now at noon on a fall weekday, the half-closed blinds are a skeptic’s eyes, their glasses reflecting what one son dubs “the burning trees”; one door is shut halfway, the cement drive is pocked and vacant, the last puddles from last night’s rain empty into atmosphere’s thirsty throat. We turn, pass a pile of leaves, raked but left for dead, and an inert trampoline, black mat sprung tightly to its metal frame.

“That’s Jay’s house,” one son says. “He’s my friend. He’s at school.”

Simple sentences all. I’m stuck on “He’s my friend”: the shortest distance between two points, a declaration of place in the cosmos, the universe turned from mighty stranger into neighborhood where doors are left half open at midday and life is paused unafraid while folks are away. I know they know this older boy only by name, only by the simplest of run-ins and yells-out as we pass: “Hi, Jay.” Yet he’s named: They know it, they call it, and he responds to it. And were he trouncing the leaves now or launching spaceward on the black tramp they would call his name, “Jay, friend,” and continue on their way, happy to be a part of this universe home.