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318 Sangamon Street

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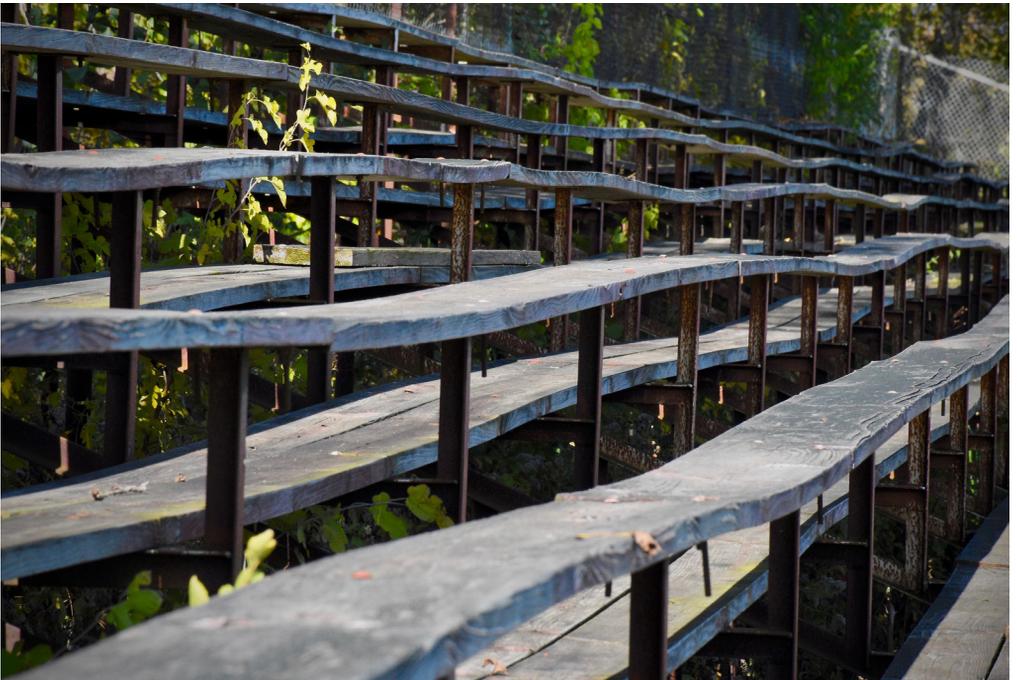
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It was supposed to be a starter home
Like how the long brown coffee table
Made of plastic and pressboard
Was donated by our deceased grandmother
Until we could afford another.
One of its cabinet doors hung broken,
Propped up against the peeling wood veneer.
When I was young I'd press my fingers
Into the scalloped edges of the table.
The grooves looked like tiger claws or talon marks,
Its plastic faded chocolate brown to khaki from
Rubbing my fingertips into them.
My brother and I played Cowboys and Indians on its top
With colored plastic figures and a couple of nickels
Used as bombs to slide through enemy lines.
Or we played paper football, flicking the triangle
Through hands made into goalposts
With our elbows braced upright
On the sagging tabletop.

We made do with the coffee table for years
Along with the spot where the cats soaked the rug
And carpet pad with urine,
Softening the linoleum tile underneath,
Rotting the wooden strip it was tacked on.
Just like we made do with broken beds
Pocked with piss, sweat and pubescent stains--
The earnest history of childhood longings
Found in the topography of discolorations--
Bent curtain rods with orange drapes
That the cats caught their claws in,
Hissing at something outside in the dark,
Bringing down both with a bang,
Exposing the naked porch light
Clotted with dead mosquitoes.
My brother would not wake, however,
And I was already awake, lying on my back,
Counting backwards and trying not to think.
We tolerated the yard of mud in the front,
And a tree sprouting in the foundation,
Shedding its leaves and winged seeds on the roof,
Growing ancient prairie plants in the gutters.

We took turns tolerating and ignoring,
Making do with whatever happened to work.
We tackled the ones we could,
Solving the fixable to make us feel better.
And we felt better, bonded by what was unique,
Like a weed growing in the cracks,
Beautiful even though damned by its name
Surrounded by the coarse and broken company
Of sidewalk.

We ignored
the chipped concrete of the back porch
Stained burgundy with mulberries,
Alive with teeming flies and June bugs,
The larvae moving underneath
The garbage can lid that smelled like murder
Or the back porch that looked like murder,
Or another kind of death you have to be careful
Not to talk about.



Do the Wave

Jim Waters