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M.H. Bowker

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Poésie Banlieue, or, the Plano Suicides

1.

In the suburbs, gods are satisfactions. Needs, therefore, blaspheme. Unmet needs convert to ectomies, which are insatiable and can only be filled up. Some parents fill up their ectomies with children, who are given unto suburban gods.

2.

Our environs were pretty pitches. Yet suburbs are places superior to which we ought to be. Mornings we had soft-boiled eggs in scarry mugs: little, white, plastic things like outdoor teacups or something someone else would throw away. It’s not like we refused. There was nothing to which we were superior.

3.

Sliding patio doors rattled potted plants and wooden tables whereupon soft-boiled eggs were served. Streaky windows splintered sunlight on cat fur
and discolored spots of carpet, on linoleum floors that smelled vaguely of pine. You see, *environs* fill up *ectomies*. Which is to say we lived in pitches — pretty, scarry — that became us.

4.

Suburbs such as ours produced people who would, later, become devoted listeners of Rush Limbaugh (2012a; 2012b), who dropped out of a suburban college and taught himself to say the terrible, sarcastic things the protolimbaughlisteners only thought:

> When you’ve taken more than your share and then you use that to flee the city, well, then you are held in contempt. And you have to be gotten even with […]. The suburbs stole the wealth of the inner city […]. In suburbia, that’s where the good schools are. That’s where the clean malls are […]. Remember, the rich are to blame for everything. The achievers, those who succeed on their own, they are the ones to blame for all of these problems. You fled the inner cities when they needed you most. You took your money and you took your life and you took everything to the suburbs, and you left those who couldn’t afford to go with nothing.

We knew who they were: children proud and angry, safe and dangerous.

No matter what we thought of the protolimbaughlisteners, we believed they loved themselves because their mothers loved them passionately.

(We were not politically correct and did not think of fathers because, frankly, in the suburbs of the 1970s and 1980s, mothers did most of the loving, or were supposed to.)

It was impossible not to be jealous of the mothers’ love that, we thought, surely warmed, like sunlit windows unbesmirched
by streaks, the tidy houses of the protolimbaughlisteners, a love
that permitted its conferrees to experience their every wretched
impulse as a kind of poetry.

We may not have stolen money or abandoned anyone, but
our neighborhoods were, indeed, built on theft and segregation.

5.

At first, we rode bikes in stripmall parking lots. We smoked
stolen low-tar cigarettes behind back-yard fences. We played
in drainage pipes and dry, dirt fields. We loaded poorly hidden
handguns. We got beaten up by parents and big brothers and
football coaches and Deans of Discipline. We woke our teachers
when they fell asleep at their desks.

In 1983 and 1984, a lot of us killed ourselves.

Again, in 1999, a lot more of us: half deliberately, half only
half-deliberately, from heroin.

First, they called our deaths clusters, as in bombs or granola.
Then, they called them waves, as in tidal or “of grain.”
Everyone feigned paroxysmal wordlessness and hid unwant-
ed metaphorical boners.

Plano, Texas became “the suicide capital of the United States”
(Block 2011; Durington 2008).

People loved that we amateurly shot average-quality dope
and asphyxiated ourselves in pre-owned cars in attached ga-
rages.

These undesirable surprises validated surprising American
desires: that a middling teenaged anybody could have a decent
home of eggs and sunlight, play in the varsity game, hook up
with a Chili’s hostess, and then snuff himself right out.

“I think what parents in this situation find offensive,” said a
Dallas psychologist who requested not to be named, “is that by
killing themselves, their sons and daughters are committing an
ultimate act of rejection.”

“The parents have worked to build what they consider the
perfect lifestyle, and their children are saying […] ‘This lifestyle
is so painful that I’d rather die.’” (Stiteler 1983).
Astonishing how much is missed in this statement.

6.

Banlieue is the French word for suburb.

It is a better word because a banlieue extends the ban, the jurisdiction of a city.

But ban also means the enforcement of the boundary: in and out.

Suburbs (banlieues) are not just places, but states of being wherein people find comfort at the perimeters of life, activity, interest.

The lieue in banlieue has nothing to do with a lieu (place)

Lieu is a unit of measure, like a “league,” as in “twenty-thousand under.”

Those who inhabit banlieues are not always comfortable. The physical comforts of the manifest suburbs attest to the psychic discomforts of metaphorical banlieues.

A banlieue is, by definition, what is not a center. The center is the thing to which a banlieue attends and upon which the banlieue depends. The center is that which the banlieue admires, but also that which the banlieue rejects.

A banlieue is banal and a place of abandonment [abandonner: from mettre à bandon].

Do suburbanites abandon their centers or have banlieusards been abandoned by what is — or what was once — central? Or are these two abandonments identical?

In any case, banlieusards remain bound to the very center from which they are banished.

Without tremendous effort, once banlieusards, we become inferior to the central life, thereafter circumnavigated with love and hatred, jealously and fear.

Most of us take our inability to escape our environs as evidence that we’re unqualified for the central life, a life lived in and from our centers.

Most of us dedicate ourselves to re-creating and re-creating the manifest comforts and internal discomforts we know.
7.

Once, I walked into a suburban Methodist church on a weekday afternoon.
   No parishioners were there, but some workers talked loudly in back.
   An authoritative woman peered in, scowled at me.
   She thought I was doing the talking.
   The next time she passed by, I did everything in my power to appear silent, even though I was silent.
   There is nothing we can do to appear more silent than we are. Rather, there is only one thing we can do to appear more silent than we are.