

Wendy Walters

Troy, Michigan

Futurepoem, 2014

REVIEWED BY KRISTIN PALM

Many years ago, when I had just finished college, I lived briefly in Troy, Michigan. I was working a low-paying publishing job, and I shared a one-bedroom apartment with a friend in a sprawling complex on 16 Mile, more commonly known as Big Beaver Road. Across the eight-lane divided thoroughfare sat a Perry Drugs (now Rite Aid), to which we always drove. I took up roller blading, as the parking lots of the neighboring office complexes beckoned with their boundless, freshly blacktopped vistas. Each weekday morning, I would drive to a Kroger grocery store on Long Lake (aka 18 Mile) to catch a commuter van into Detroit. In these early morning hours, and again on my drive home, I would catch a glimpse of the suburb's more bucolic side—tidy ranch houses and Colonials set amidst remnants of the wooded expanse they had replaced. This existence was the opposite of the urbane life I had dreamed for myself, and my experience was thankfully fleeting. When I return to my old stomping grounds, it is to visit the REI or Nordstrom Rack that have sprung up behind my old residence.

My loose personal connection to Troy, Michigan is only part of what makes *Troy, Michigan* such a poignant read. Troy, Michigan could be anywhere, after all. *Troy, Michigan*, on the other hand, is Wendy S. Walters' own richly nuanced world, imbued with experiences, sensibilities, indignities and ironies that are hers alone. This is one writer's account of a place, to be sure. More so, though, it is an examination of the fears and desires, perverse and otherwise, that shaped that place and of their impact on the individual and collective psyche. (It is also, it should be noted, an exquisite collection of sonnets.)

Founded in 1929, in part for purposes of distilling alcohol, Troy remained a small farming community through the 1950s, according to Walters' account. ("Anyone here might/have been kin until 1955 when planners drew/a map of a city over a town," she writes.) Like most American suburbs, its late-century expansion was abetted by a fatal combination of ill-informed urban planning and irrational urban fear. Yet in this particular case, suburbia held its own grave terror. Throughout the 1970s, families in Troy and surrounding suburbs lived in very real trepidation of the Oakland County Child Killer, who kidnapped and murdered four young children on four separate occasions, leaving their bodies in the snow. One can't help but read race into the fact that, to this day, you will hear suburbanites routinely express their fears of largely African American Detroit, but you never hear anyone say, "Stay away from Troy." Walters alludes to this sad irony by juxtaposing Detroit's 1967 rebellion/riots and the murders (giving more weight to the latter, as it was no doubt etched more deeply in her young mind). But it is her accounts of the ways race played out in the classroom, on the playground and in the neighborhood that are the most acute. ("Private access/converts bigots into quiet neighbors," she writes.) Like Whitman, from whom she borrows, Walters is a master of song and imagery. The minimalist musicality with which she tells her tales—the classmate who, when drawing, "turned her into shadow" (and the mother who "gasped" and "re-drew her daughter brown"); a cancelled play date due to "our girl being black"; the thought that "*maybe my face is wrong*"—only deepens the cuts.

It can be easy to forget that inside cookie cutter homes and along uniform cul-de-sacs are living, breathing people with living, breathing lives. Their stories, and the stories of the places they create, are essential. "Anywhere/else gets an epic, why not us?" Walters asks. And so, we "[s]tart with some common interests in escape," and move temporarily through a town of dirt and gravel roads to one that merits four exits on the interstate, and yet where "we find/the best of us is us plus us . . ."

Walters is cunning in her language and her associations (“... her pen/
dangerously sharp to her eyes”):

One plan for the city, though not approved,
involved building a downtown of business
and housing units. A fear of mixed-use
space reflected mistrust, a solitude
philosophy. . . .

Like the city drawn over the town, these poems are deeply layered. But Walters’ linguistic economy creates vivid directional markers, clear indicators of how we arrived *here* from *here*. There is no getting off the hook. Walters’ incisiveness—of language, of form, of observation—illuminates a suburb in America and, in doing so, illuminates America. *Troy, Michigan* is revelatory, heart wrenching and very real. It’s mapmaking of the best kind.