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UNFLEDGED

Weekends too my father roofed poor neighborhoods,
at prices only his back could carry
into profit. In the name of labor’s
virtue—or was it another bill collector’s callous
calling again?—my brother and I became
his two-boy cleanup crew. During those hard,
gloved hours under the sun’s weight, I studied
my father, from the ground—the distance he kept
between us his version of worry. This work gave him
chance to patch over his latest night in county jail, to shout
over something other than his drug-heavy belly song.
More than witnessing the way he knew a hammer,
more than the sweat, the grace of his body grew
when I noticed the cheap pigeon magazines tucked
in his back pocket—black & white photos
of pedigreed squabs he’d fallen for, folded
for a later that never came: the careful study we do
with things that refuse to become ours.
Evenings, he tended to his own home-made
kit-box of birds, bathed in the constant coos
from a mongrel mix of orphaned Birmingham rollers
and hand-captured homers that he bred the distance out of,
turning our block into the new destination
their blood pulled them toward. On the job,
from below, as he perched and drove nails through
the day’s heat, I checked the silhouetted length of his back
for signs of stiffness, and his impossible arms, anything
I might point to—certain, like most people,
if the ache could be found, you’d know
how to start soothing, where to place your hands.