

The Ballad of Dean Corll

Poetry • Gerrard Hanly

By 1973, the petroleum industry had made Houston an opulent modern metropolis. It had suddenly become the sixth-largest city in the United States, with the third-most rapid population growth, behind only New York and Chicago. It also had the highest murder rate per capita of any city in the nation.

An indelible smog
and the white facades of the grain elevators
make this place shift and dance on the horizon
like the heat-puddles on the highway.
The whole city is built on corpses.

Look in its foundation,
there are living things, rotting in their slumber,
seeping into the concrete,
slipping out from that sunken dark
into a different, deeper sort.

But he wasn't always to blame; he was sweet,
He always combed his hair.
Fathers passed through, setting up franchises before
moving on to the coast, while his mother cried in her room.
She was washing plates when the phone rang.

28 people,
boys, no less,
with their three-speed bikes,
their summer jobs
Oh, dear God.

But even worse is that
when I am my best,
I look identical to him.
If you dug up my boat shed,
you'd find the ribcage of something I've hid.