

**James Cihlar**

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## **House Beautiful**

The lady across the hall  
smoked, and her cigarettes trailed  
through the plumbing into my apartment.  
As Bill and my sister and brother-in-law

moved my stuff out of the Soviet-bloc-  
style apartments in Columbia Heights, Minnesota,  
she opened the door  
and yelled drunken gibberish at my sister.

Rita lived in a Wisconsin cabin outside the cities  
for three seasons of the year, with Binks,  
a pet turtle, and Chippie, an uninvited  
chipmunk. The sign outside Richmond reads,

The City Beautiful. Neither of these places  
was home. When Rita turned sixteen,  
our mother set fire to her sheets  
as Rita slept in bed. Through the flames,

she sang to her, Happy Birthday  
to you, Happy Birthday to you.  
Six blocks down from the Capitol  
in Nebraska, I once soaked in the tub

with my headphones on, Paul  
in bed, the phallic deco building  
glowing in the flood lights  
as cars circled its base,

men cruising  
in what was known as the fruit loop.  
That was my apartment. Long story short:

I later moved in with him, then I moved out.

Okay, back up: I came home from the party  
just noticing the rips in my shirt from the fight,  
and he had pushed the furniture in front of the doors  
so I couldn't get in.

Later, by myself in my own apartment  
on thirteenth and "B" Street,  
I sat in front of the speckled mirror tiles,  
free Gevalia coffee-maker brewing its first pot of coffee,

watching myself eat a delivered pizza,  
with *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* playing  
on a UHF channel. Believe it or not,  
that was the closest to home I'd gotten by then.

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*"Playing Tea Party with Dylan." Photo: Rita Hermann.*