

## *Song of the Suburbs: The Importance of Imagination*

*by Barbara McKinley*

I realize that at any given moment, we are making choices. Given the opportunity to make choices. These days, the options can be *exciting*. Do I go to a movie? A concert? Start a new book? Listen to a favorite podcast?

In the year of the pandemic, many of us were forced to become introverted. For the first time, the choices were limited. We began to contemplate not only our free time but also our work time.

This collection of poetry and narrations was written some time ago, but I am only now sharing it. Reading about songs glorifying the suburbs may have seemed absurd in the past, but perhaps we are learning to appreciate the beauty of small details and actions that bring value to life.

These songs or poems were written after I became a parent and began thinking about my own parents. My children. And then parents of other children at their school.

I chose the title because the acceptance of living in the suburbs meant accepting that I had left the university and was starting a new venture called home ownership and raising a family. The streets with lawns and almost identical houses put pressure on the families to keep up appearances for the “other families” and the community. Thinking about what other people thought in that public space. And by working on our property, we were protecting the property value of others.

For me, this was a sterile environment and I was not quite ready to care about the neighbors. The boredom of this “stable” neighborhood might be a privilege some might never see. That awareness would not come until later.

Recently, I have seen that others have in fact chosen to write about the suburbs, in one form or another

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If I had looked, I would have seen an Argentinian film called “La canción de los barrios,” perhaps a film with a similar notion. Albums have now been written by Ben Rector and Arcade Fire. A novel, a road novel, is now written with the same title as

my book of poems or songs.

The suburbs must have had some creative spark that has been overlooked or unappreciated. Indeed, I read in my internet searches, that the “Beach Boys” attitude and approach to music was “suburban inspired.” The ever-present garage sales – giving way to Facebook sale forums— are another suburban, post-World War II phenomenon, from the focus on consumerism.

For whatever reason, this poetry emerged as a way to find human connection in this otherwise unfamiliar, and for me, unwelcome environment.

After the pandemic year, many have realized the importance of connection.

For each poem, I wrote a narrative, not to explain the poem, but as a companion piece. A story about the event that sparked the poem. Below is one such couplet.

#### **The Son -- Narrative:**

After my divorce, I taught two classes on the same high school campus as my oldest daughter. While she attended the comprehensive high school in front, I taught students at an alternative high school program at the back of the school. Shared campuses are becoming more common nowadays, but at time, it was a new phenomenon.

There was some overlap of students—she knew some of the students in the alternative program and vice versa. I wanted to keep an eye on her but not be too close. I'd see her friends sitting around eating lunch in the open area. They'd call out, “Hi, Jo,” when they saw me walking across the open quad. I had known her friends, and they knew me. The elementary school they had attended gave us that sense of community, no matter where we were.

Interestingly, when I added the narratives, I taught in Abu Dhabi, again living close to this oldest daughter. This time, we both had overseas assignments, but at different schools. There was again some overlap between the students. She helped me earlier to understand how to teach high school students, and this time, she helped me understand what motivates the Bedouins. That will be another story to tell.

The spark for this poem came from students at the alternative high school. One student came in excited, asking if they could see Danny, a former wrestler, who was going to speak to the main school campus in the auditorium. He was dying from cancer and came to schools to talk to students about how important it was to live each day to its fullest. I suspected my students were interested in this event as a way to get out of class, but I said sure.

We were all surprised by how Danny touched us. The students in the alternative program were in my class because they had messed up. Danny was telling them, "Do something with your life. Make each day count."

More than his words, the feeling in that auditorium was what overwhelmed us. I shared this poem with my students the next day and found a way to mail the poem to Danny's family. I was told they read it to him. The poem was originally called, "Dear Danny."

He died a week after they shared the poem with him.

## **The Son**

You soared like Phoebus.

The cobalt-blue light waves  
that flared through you,  
have zapped us.

The light rays that  
-- have lifted you up  
and held that deadly  
enemy at sword's edge,  
-- have held those dark forces to a  
piercing shoulder-blade jolt,

-- to a thin line of shooting  
muscle spasms up your leg.

— That radiated light, which  
entered your body again and again  
while you lay hapless  
on that cold hospital bed.

-- That light,  
it warmed us.

It entered our bodies.  
That warm light, which  
contained and boxed  
that darkness in you.

It entered where you spoke—  
Your words wrapped us in a cloak.

We felt them.

That light, it entered us,  
shone on our face as  
an iridescent tear.

That laser light, it guides  
us now.

We hold it in our hands,  
The Sun.