THE CITY ABLAZE

by Susan B. A. Somers-Willett

TO CELEBRATE Ford Motor Company's fiftieth anniversary, Norman Rockwell painted *The Street Was Never the Same Again*, in which a 1903 Model A Ford belches smoke through a bustling small town, its many residents wearing expressions of surprise and awe at the might of American industry at the turn of the century. The street Rockwell selected as the backdrop for his iconic depiction was Fourth Avenue in Troy, New York—a city whose architectural character was forged by the boom of the meatpacking, textile, and steel industries during the Industrial Revolution.

When I first visited Troy, I ogled the rows of Victorian brownstones as I imagine Rockwell did, charmed by their sturdy brick exteriors and carved window ledges. But their pristine exteriors belie the emptiness and neglect of many of these houses. Troy is an industrial city in a post-industrial world, and just as Rockwell's Model A drove down Fourth Avenue, industry itself drove straight out of Troy, leaving behind a class of laborers to slip into poverty.

Though America may have forgotten Troy, Troy certainly hasn't forgotten America. An image of Uncle Sam or the American flag greets a visitor on every corner, and Troy is home to the largest annual Flag Day parade in the country. A Civil War monument rises high above the heart of its historic downtown. Atop the soaring pillar, a determined-looking woman cast in bronze towers over the city at four times life-size. Sturdy-legged and ready for a fight, she looks skyward, clutching a sword in one hand and a trumpet in the other. She is Columbia, the female personification of America, posed as a literal call to arms. And she's right to blow her horn, for the women of Troy are perpetually under siege.

Those women who might have worked in mills sewing collars in an earlier era now clean toilets and hotel rooms and fry up supersized meals. They belong to the growing class of Americans we know as the working poor: minimum-wage service workers whose schedules fall just short of full time for a reason. Not eligible for company health insurance and often the primary income earners for their families, they fill in the financial gaps with food stamps, housing vouchers, Medicaid, and welfare. As important as they are to the American economy, politicians still reductively refer to them as "welfare mothers" and "burdens to the state," as if they are somehow an affront to the American way of life and not a cornerstone of it.

The working-class women I met in Troy became mothers at young ages, and, like their mothers before them, they frown on abortion, can be stubborn about using birth control, and consider motherhood a badge of honor. The bonds between them are tight-knit and fierce. Men are an endangered species in Troy and nuclear families are rare, so these women rely on an extended network of female family members and friends to help with domestic responsibilities when their "baby daddies" go to prison or just "away." They groom and hug each other, fix each other's hair, broadcast gossip on their stoops and prepaid cell phones. Most of the women I met are white but many of them date across color lines. Their kids represent the entire racial spectrum. "Cousin" is a term used loosely; they all seem to be part of each other's family. Some women take this intimacy into the bedroom even as they may disavow lesbian lifestyles. Their intimacy is also a means of self-preservation: they invest their attention in one another because the rest of America regards them as either a problem or wholly invisible.

I entered this culture of women in the summer of 2009, with the intention of reporting on the economic crisis in verse, alongside radio journalist Lu Olkowski and documentary photographer Brenda Ann Kenneally. For many years, Brenda has been photographing the women who live on or near the same block of Sixth Avenue in Troy as part of her project "Upstate Girls." She has seen many of them ensnared in the same traps she either narrowly escaped or outlived: teenage pregnancy, poverty, drugs, state custody, prison.

Three women I've profiled in this series of poems—DJ Guerin, Dana Aftab, and Billie Jean Hill—are longtime subjects of Brenda's. They all have lived at some point on the same block of Sixth Avenue, and they all are mothers currently receiving some kind of public assistance. DJ is known to her friends as "the Wildcat." She is thirty-two and the mother of seven kids, four of whom live with her and the first of whom she had at fifteen. She works part-time at the Hess gas station, a job which pays her enough money to put gas in her van and pay child support for the children not living with her. DJ was recently evicted from her apartment. Her four younger children are staying temporarily at her mother's house while she surfs between friends' apartments. She talks tough, shouts insults above the fray of her kids, was abused as a girl by a family member just like her mother before her and her daughter after her. She admits to a short temper and says she wants to go to anger-management classes. As she juggles the responsibilities of a working parent, the most precious commodity in DJ's life seems to be free time. She spends rare child-free moments driving friends around town, visiting her boyfriend, or drinking on a stoop with girlfriends and watching the neighborhood drama unfold—"running the roads," her mother calls it.

At twenty-one, Dana is the only woman I met who considers herself on the path toward economic independence. She got pregnant at seventeen and, after a difficult last-minute decision, gave up her baby girl through an open adoption to a couple in her family's evangelical church. Dana was ostracized by many of her friends for her decision to give up her child. She became pregnant with another daughter in 2008 and married the father, a Pakistani American who converted from Islam to Christianity during their courtship. Religion is now a large part of Dana's family life. She shares a small two-bedroom apartment decorated with family photos and Bible verses with her husband, their one-year-old daughter, and her four-year-old stepdaughter. A full-time mom, Dana supplements her husband's modest income as a disaster cleanup technician by cleaning her pastor's house once a week. Although she still relies on food stamps and Medicaid to help make ends meet, she is optimistic about the future and dreams of living a middle-class suburban lifestyle and having more children. Dana talks about her life in "past" and "future" stages; she describes herself as a person who made some bad choices as a teenager but who has chosen a more responsible path as a Christian wife and mother. Still, when I talked with Dana, I sensed an unspoken sadness and perhaps boredom with her life. It made me wonder if the division of her life into the scripts of former-bad-girl and future-good-girl had left much room for her present, which is admittedly difficult with two small children and a growing sense of financial responsibility.

Billie Jean is a brash and tenderhearted twenty-five-year-old single mother of a seven-year-old son. She recently lost her part-time job as a hotel housekeeper and had to move out of the three-bedroom apartment she shared with her sister and baby niece after her sister gave birth to twins. She's now living in a hotel room—the temporary housing assigned to her by the state—as she looks for a place of her own. Her mother, a daily drinker with whom Billie Jean has an on-and-off relationship, looks after another family's children in exchange for free living space in an unfinished basement. Billie Jean talks loudly and listens to her music more loudly; with her most recent federal tax-return money she bought four-foot-tall speakers that make the windows in her apartment shake. She dates black men exclusively and craves things that make her feel good: sex, parties, fast food, marijuana. She went to prison on a felony charge after a drug bust

at her apartment. She's also battling depression and a perpetual broken heart. She has dreams of owning her own McDonald's franchise someday, growing old with a man who is good to her, and living in a house with a white picket fence. Above all, she wants to be someone's favorite person. She moved to St. Louis once with a man who she thought would be her lifetime partner, but he started physically abusing her soon after they left New York state. She returned to Troy after he was sent to prison for beating, raping, and sodomizing her in front of her son.

All three of these women self-identify as poor, and although some of them have the dream of joining Middle America, few believe they will actually succeed. Theirs is a day-to-day existence in which there is much drama but little change. When I asked them if anything had changed in their lives as a result of the recent economic crisis, they all replied "No." To many of them, it feels as if their economic positions will always remain the same even as more people may be joining them in line at the Office of Temporary Assistance.

In photographing the women of Troy over several years, Brenda has developed what many documentarians might consider a shocking lack of boundaries with her subjects. She brings her teenage son with her on trips to Troy, gets embroiled in family dramas, hands over a few dollars when she can for gas or rent. The fluidity between her subjects' lives and her own affords Brenda's images an incredible intimacy. In many ways these photographs are self-portraits, images of whom Brenda could have become had she not explored the world beyond her own upstate working-class girlhood. When her subjects pose for portraits, Brenda directs them not to smile—an artistic nod to the stately poses necessitated by early photography and meant to undo the imperative to "say cheese" in the modern family snapshot. I suspect it is also a reflection of how Brenda remembers or wants to remember growing up in West Albany: as a streetwise girl with a hostile beauty facing the roles of motherhood and dependence on the state that everyone else around her saw as inevitable. It is the expression of stretch marks and cigarettes and swing shifts fueled by Mountain Dew. It is the necessary toughness of girls besieged too soon by the responsibilities of single parenting and financial independence, and when this expression is burned onto paper—when we meet their gaze with ours—Brenda's wish for these women to live beyond the streets that raised them comes sharply into focus.

In contemplating the embattled lives of Brenda's subjects—lives presided over by the bronze figure announcing her call to arms—I couldn't help but recall Euripides's tragedy *The Trojan Women*, in which the conquered city of Troy burns as its women await enslavement and mourn their husbands and sons slaughtered by the Greeks. The women of today's Troy face a less dire but not dissimilar fate. With the men in their lives largely absent or imprisoned, they are left behind to construct a domestic sphere for themselves and their children in a crumbling city, some of them in the throes of homelessness, depression, addiction, or abuse. As dark as this existence may sound, there is also much light to be found here: a family's hands clasped in prayer over a Mother's Day meal, a van stuffed with ladies wearing lip gloss for an impromptu midnight drive to a club, a toddler using her newfound legs to dance to Ol' Dirty Bastard as it thumps through her aunt's sky-high speakers. Moments like these prove that even as these women describe themselves as poor, their poverty does not define them. ◘

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A CALL TO ARMS

Don't make the mistake of calling her
angel or saint. The tremendous broad crowning
Troy's war monument grips her sword

and blows her horn for the *sake* of war,
not for its spoils, and so for her no poems are written.
For her, men stuff and cock their guns.

They go upstate, these men, or just *away*.
Those left languish here in bronze, cast
among glistening plumes of smoke at Gettysburg

or swirling dreamlessly in the iron tomb
of the foundering *Monitor*. Even homeboy Uncle Sam
stands frozen, soldered together in a weird

patchwork of steel. The women are another story.
A block away, the metal belly of the 22 to Albany swells
with an army of hotel domestics who have been waiting,

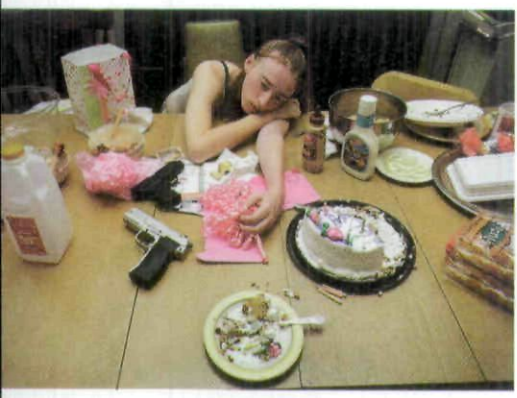
eternally waiting, at the Uncle Sam Bus Stop. The driver
says *God bless* when they board as if this
waiting were some test of faith, as if this waiting

could approximate something the living do.
The bus hisses gas into the lindens, noses past
a slatted factory that grins an emptiness so wide

it belies its wooden ribs. The bronze bitch
atop the city hasn't turned a blind eye
to any of this. It's just that she never

promised anyone here victory, only offered
this dull blade and the collar
of nerves a girl needs

to walk down the block
and receive the beating
someone said she deserves.

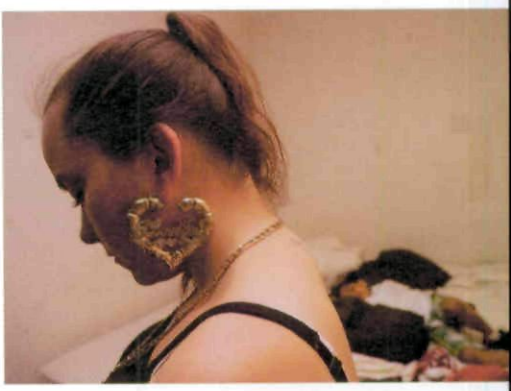


IN THE OFFICE OF TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE

Did you know? You have the right to receive food stamps within a few days if you are eligible and have little or no money. Do any of these apply to you? Pregnant? Need to establish paternity? Need child support? Drug/alcohol problem? Fuel or utility shutoff? No place to stay/homeless? No food? No job? Recently lost income? Pending eviction? You have the right to receive an application when you ask for it. Did you know? When was the last time you or anyone who lives with you worked? Are you participating in a strike? Did you know? You can get WIC even if you are not a legal resident. What type of work would you like to do? Could you accept a job today? Are you a felon, fleeing to avoid prosecution, in violation of parole? Do you live in section 8 or other subsidized housing? Do you live in a drug or alcohol rehab facility? Did you know? We must accept your application if, at minimum, it contains your name, address (if you have one) and signature. How long have you lived at your present address? Is this a shelter? These programs are meant to assist you only until you can fully support yourself and your family. Did you know? If total expenses exceed income, explore how the household is meeting its obligations. Do you or anyone who lives with you have cash on hand? Stocks, bonds, or mutual funds? An IRA, Keogh, 401(k)? A safe deposit box? Life insurance? A burial fund? A burial space? Are you blind, disabled, or pregnant? Black, white, unknown? Are you a victim of domestic violence? Did you know? If so, when did you know it?

JUST A GIRL

Billie Jean



Her sister's water broke this morning and her Cymbalta's not working and she's soon to be homeless because those twin nephews are fast on their way but today her ex-lover's baby mother is going to be at the Flag Day parade and she's lost weight and fuck if she's not gonna look tight and fine so she spanks on the elastic of her best tube dress and props each pale leg on the sink for a quick dry shave and straps on her five-dollar sandals, the ones with rhinestones gleaming over clear plastic heels, and with three boys in tow and her sister's toddler in a stroller, she struts down the parade route past a tall Uncle Sam while men swear *Goddamn!* in the direction of her glorious and soft American ass. *This is what I live for,* she says, *this is why I go outside, you shoulda saw the other day what I had on oh my god I swear to god I could not get down the block,* and the spectating girls jiggle their babies and smack their lips talking this that and the third about her as her epic hollow hearts of gold bamboo swing low in each ear winking I LOVE YOU in silver script and when she turns to witness her ex's baby mother suck her teeth, the tattoo on her neck flexes the words JUST A GIRL like the Michael Jackson song—*She's just a girl who claims that I am the one*—and when she turns, the street lights up behind her with the shine of trumpets, cymbals crash and the dancing girls of Troy High throw their glittering foil hoops in the air. That afternoon on her way to the store Billie Jean smiles at the driver of a passing van as he hoots to his nephew: *Hey boy, look at that! One day you'll have something like that!* and she strikes back: *Take a picture, it'll last longer* and poses low and leggy on a stoop and he takes her picture with his phone, saves it with her number so he can say to his friends, *Take a look at my new baby, Billie Jean,* this girl who is not his lover but who may be, possibly and soon, because this girl has the look of love, the look of the broken-hearted: her bent-over body glows in his phone just for him and she wears this expression of what might be a promise, what might be trouble, this image of her fading in the palm of his hand as her sweet ass switches its way down the block and makes a grown man exclaim *God Bless America!*

THE CUTTING PLACE

DJ

She's always been a tomboy, Mama Vic says, *Mouthy.*
Runnin' the roads. Not comin' home, and as she speaks

DJ slicks back her yellow mane into a ponytail where it rats,
her slight thighs packed into tight khakis and her chest

lost in a baggy green workshirt from the Hess,
no makeup, all attitude, one hand grabbing her imaginary

dick and the other ripe with gasoline, newly evicted,
her lazy eye wandering over the Babel of seven kids

now occupying her mother's living room—*My bitch,*
Mama Vic calls her, *my baby bitch*—and when this bitch rages,

the woman who made her daughters pick their own switch
for a bare-bottomed whuppin' she deemed *The Peabody Special*

takes her grandkids in, ambles toward the ailing
couch to pick out their nits with a comb.

DJ spits into her phone, *Dat bitch better step back*
or I'll beat her ass, hangs up, lights another Newport

as her name surely immolates in the mouth of the girl
on the other end of the line, and the children scream over

three porkchops and a slab of mac and cheese she's fixed
after her shift, her anger a fast-rising balloon in this room

where her mother's Madonna of the Dolphins
opens her porcelain arms over the television to bless

Maury Povich and his inglorious guests. Days later,
DJ will fidget in the pumped-up vinyl chair

contemplating her wet hair like a favorite pet or maybe
cursing it just for being there, sour because she knows

that when the snips come, they come fast, they will cut
and cut like her tongue can cut, faster than the cry of

any child who may need her, her mother's glower, her temper
shorter than summer; in her mind revs a van filled with

dollars of gas and clothes in the back, a narrowing list of houses
she could run to and the narrowing roads she might drive

to reach that beautiful fair-haired girl
she was before her years as a woman—years which,

after the cut is over, she will sweep
into a dustpan with the length of a broom.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ADVICE FOR THE PENNY BRIDE IN TIMES OF ECONOMIC CRISIS

Dana

On her wedding day, a bride should slip a good penny into her shoe
to ensure luck and wealth during the life of her marriage.
Forget the old, the new, the borrowed, the blue.

Has brass or copper stained your finger a greenish hue?
Turn the penny into a gold ring. Layaway payments you can manage
after the wedding day. Good bride, slip a penny into your shoe

and the white dress is a matter of cents, the veil cut from raw tulle.
Turn the penny into a baby and borrow the baby's carriage.
Forget the difference between old and new. Borrow the blue.

But the baby needs pink, the baby needs porridge. The baby needs shoes
and a crib and a story. All of these things you must forage.
These days a bride should slip a good penny into her shoe.

Come now: the guests are nodding. The church is speaking, saying *I do.*
Turn your face into a polished coin and spin in the air. Age
will forget what's old, what's new, the groom's suit borrowed and blue.

The reverend prays for *clean hands, pure hearts* all over you.
The baby drums inside, turning your belly to language.
Today, you slipped a gold penny into your shoe.
Forget the old and new. This bride is borrowed. She is blue.

WOMEN OF TROY

Ilium fuit, Troja est.
—Troy, NY city motto

You are the country at war and the city ablaze.
You are the flags lining Fourth Street and the singer
crooning *Proud to be an American* in his perfect
toupée. You are concrete and brownstone and groaning
row houses. You are burning in the sun
with your children to watch the Army parade.

You are the dime of piff rolled and lit to glow
its purple haze. You are cigarettes burning into
red ends on the stoop. You are the blunt
and the thong, the stem and the seed.
You are the rum mother's liquor
and the rum mother's need.

You are the Green Island Bridge and its glittering curves.

You are the Hess gas station fluorescing all through the night.

You are the Burden and its turning wheel.

You are the white dog cocking his ear over the city
and hearing no call. You are the mean-eyed
bitch staring into the street resting her shitty white
chin on the sill. You are the pit bull dreaming
at the end of her chain. You are the flex of her
brindle at the sound of her name.

You are the neon of the Nite Owl News.
You are the shop and its gold bamboo earrings,
the polished hoops and their weight in each lobe.
You are the rhinestone barrettes displayed in a case,
the homegirl wigs bobbing on their mannequin heads.
You are the homegirl's nails tipped in China Glaze red.

You are Sixth Avenue, its drivers cursing at the drivers ahead.

You are Sixth Avenue, its drivers passing: *Fuck you bitch!*

You are Sixth Avenue: white petals dizzying in the wind of cop cars.

You are the white minivan which starts or doesn't
with a screwdriver's turn. You are the empty box of
Newports crushed on the dash. You are the bass
that jumps in the speaker and the speaker's
shudder. You are the late-night
run to the club and the back-door lover.

You are the baby mother and the baby
father. You are the girls who unzip their jeans
to let out their bellies. You are the worry over
the child support you didn't get, the child support
you didn't pay. You are the unborn baby's
welfare card awaiting its first birthday.

You are the number taken to wait at the Office of Temporary Assistance.

You are the number taken to wait in the room of metal chairs and detectors.

You are the number taken to wait, its Xeroxed face repeating.

You are the unfinished basement, the brown mattress
curling in the curling brown house. You are the unfinished
basement, the dryer churning its hot word goodnight.
You are piss in the boy's bedclothes and the scent
of piss in the sink. You are your grandchildren's names
pressed into your skin with Indian ink.

You were the green pastures of Ilium.
You are the crumbling theaters of Troy.
You are the city and its women
wailing darkly and bright to bless
your city as it burns, this city
made of your light.

Hear Susan Somers-Willett read from these poems and see more photographs by Brenda Ann Kenneally at www.vqronline.org.