

Day's Heat and Mistaken Winters

by Gary Justis

Zepher 1

That's me at the old Zephyr Diner on Canal Street in Chicago, around 1982. I remember being stressed out by the summer heat when Steve Gross snapped this picture. We spent a great deal of time in this diner, talking about the unusual people in our neighborhood. I can't remember if we were talking about my upstairs neighbor at this moment, but I like to think we shared the story and laughed our attention away from the heat of the day.

My Chicago studio was raw, and it had a floor that tilted slightly towards the west. The alley that ran behind my space was diagonal to the main street that fronted my building. This architectural

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irregularity made my space a misshapen square. The walls were not set at right angles to one another, giving the illusion of the space being larger than it really was.

The landlord, John, was a tall, intense man. His coats were fine, but he was usually dirty from work whenever I saw him, and I remember his hands were like steel. He had refinements, but during the working day, he was all business, and business, as with all developers, included keeping the naysayers and enemies at bay.

His mother, Elizabeth, was a tiny woman, whose curly grey hair was ringed with marigolds on most days. She dressed in the peasant style of southern Latvia. Children from the neighborhood followed her as she made the rounds, talking to John's workmen, or listening to her ancient, crackling radio. She lived in a small apartment just above my studio, with a window that faced Jefferson Street, 18 blocks south of Downtown. She had occupied the same apartment for 60 years. John, my landlord, had been raised, along with his 3 siblings, in this two-bedroom apartment. Everyone who knew Elizabeth loved her, with her vivid, intermittent visions. She often told me about details she believed to be true, and the invisible things she witnessed.

Elizabeth stood outside my door one summer afternoon. The outside air was like a blast furnace. I greeted her from across the studio. I put on some water to boil and walked to the door. I took her hand. It was cool. I held it to my cheek, and led her to my dining room table. Her print dress made rushing sounds and seemed to throw cool air around as she moved, like the way we drag chilly air into warm rooms from the outdoors in the winter months.

She was looking at me with a strange relaxed look of adoration and concern, and then she smiled.

"Darling, you know, this climate is false. This is a tropical climate. I know these things well. The Mayor, the one who is now passed, Daley, that one he is. His Big Machine is downtown, deep under the city. There are tubes, tunnels, pipes that go like many snakes to the tops of all buildings here. The big machine makes much snow. It comes very fast to these buildings. Daley's men, they sit on the tops

of all buildings. They hang over their legs, and with both hands, they swoosh the snow into the air. It goes up, then is coming down, and swirls in many ways to the ground. That is winter here.”

The passionately painted image of winter forced a silence, the kind that I could only share with Elizabeth. We sipped our tea. I saw her reaction to its flavor. She was pleased.

“I have to write about this winter you just described. I feel obligated to make drawings of Daley’s guys.”

I picked up my pencils and pad. Her hand clasped my wrist.

“Darling. We will not let the city men know what we know. It is good to not let people know you are smart. They will leave us alone, and we have many stories to tell and think about. We will finish our tea, and keep the cold air out there.”

Later that day, I walked with my photographer friend Steven Gross, to the Zephyr Diner on Canal Street. The old window air conditioner could barely push out the heat of the afternoon. We talked about the characters of the neighborhood, in particular, Elizabeth and her Winter-Summer-Winter story. We laughed as we tried to imagine snow bound scenarios and season conspiracies. In the heat of that blistering summer, our minds could at least find temporary relief. After coffee we walked south on Canal Street. When we arrived at the center of the Canal Street Bridge, we were washed with a sudden cool breeze coming off the Chicago River, and chilled slightly by the masses of metal heat absorbing metal around us.

Steve looked at me and grinned. “Hey G, Maybe Elizabeth is right after all.”

I could accept the idea of a fraudulent winter. One only had to meditate on Elizabeth’s vision. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine Daley’s men, taking a break from their swooshing jobs, tumbling and playing in the rooftop snow.

Swoosh guys

swoosh guys 2

swoosh guys 3

Portrait of Gary Justis , © 1982 Steven E. Gross Chicago

Photo of snow fight, courtesy of Rockford Peoples Photo Archive,
Rockford, Illinois
Photos of Swooshing guys, anon.

