

Autumn in California

ALAN SOLDOSKY

It begins with the loosening of light
over the rooftops, with this wind that shakes
the loquat tree and scatters leaves
across the dew-scorched lawn,
frowzy with chickweed and Bermuda grass,
neglected all the months of summer.

It's a smell like no other—
a mixture of smoke and manure that lingers
through the morning as the haze rises.
It gets trapped in the atmosphere
despite the breeze, the wind blowing it back
in our faces. We breathe it—
what else could we breathe?

A child's voice on the cassette machine
says "Daddy" over and over.
It's almost like having him in the car
instead of this air, like a broken promise.
It even looks like fall; a glint of anguish
through the poplars, the air the color of cider.

Years ago in another place,
the World Series just over,
I'm holding the last baseball of the season,
small and lifeless in my palm.
I played with it all summer,
denting the autographs of the '59 Cardinals:
Stan Musial, Vinegar Ben Meizell, Curt Flood.
How could have known then what I would come to value?
The signatures almost worn off,
the legendary, the illustrious dead.

Frost on the bridge-struts, the parchment
of cornfields soaked with rain.
Mushrooms in the yard, the ground

beneath the apple tree sour with apples.

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