My Brother, the Artist, at Seven

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As a boy he played alone in the fields

behind our block, six frame houses

holding six immigrant families,

the parents speaking only gibberish

to their neighbors. Without the kids

they couldn't say "Good morning" and be

understood. Little wonder

he learned early to speak to himself,

to tell no one what truly mattered.

How much can matter to a kid

of seven? Everything. The whole world

can be his. Just after dawn he sneaks

out to hide in the wild, bleached grasses

of August and pretends he's grown up,

someone complete in himself without

the need for anyone, a warrior

from the ancient places our fathers

fled years before, those magic places:

Kiev, Odessa, the Crimea,

Port Said, Alexandria, Lisbon,

the Canaries, Caracas, Galveston.

In the damp grass he recites the names

over and over in a hushed voice

while the sun climbs into the locust tree

to waken the houses. The husbands leave

for work, the women return to bed, the kids

bend to porridge and milk. He advances

slowly, eyes fixed, an animal or a god,

while beneath him the earth holds its breath.