

AMERICAN PAWPAW

I tell myself to collect the mail from your empty
house but sit, instead, on the porch steps.
Cars and bicycles move across the open space
between me and the motionless backdrop --
the quiet ball field, the old arboretum.

A box van skids to a stop by the pawpaw tree on the corner.
Two wiry men leap out and reverse their caps to duck
under low-hanging branches. They are boys, really
with sun brown necks. One climbs up, smooth as a mink.
The whole tree quivers while he drops ripe, glandular
fruit to his partner who fills a shirttail pouch.
Not their first trip.
Some Mamaw taught them right.

At a picnic table nearby, a young man in running tights
pretends not to watch. As soon as they leave he slips
under the pawpaw, peers up, jiggles the trunk, gets nothing.
Wipes boot-mud from the brass plate, stares at the name,
Asimina triloba. After a time he
snatches green ones within reach, and wanders
away, head lowered to the hard forms in his pale hands,
puzzling over a lesson missed, a hunger found.

ZOÉ STRECKER