

A Poem for the Track

My grandparents used someone's rain checks in '73.
For my dad's first race, my mom found tickets on Pit Road,
knowing the action would bring him back. In '89
when we finally landed three renewable seats in Northeast Vista,
I scoped the infield with binoculars and also Emerson Fittipaldi
as he waved from the convertible. Fittipaldi won again
when my sister first came. I always marveled at the symmetry
of the repeat winners, of the Unsers, Bettenhausens, Rahals, Foyts,
of the track's curved rectangle, of parking along Lafayette Road
or in the same yard since Mario Andretti won in '69 in a ritual
to break the curse, of walking to the same seats next to
the same people who always brought box lunches or only beer
or lunchmeat sandwiches packed back in to Wonder Bread bags.
When Nabors sang "Back Home Again," everyone's tears
could have filled the Wabash. Engines started up like a choir.
Cars paraded by in a low thrall, three abreast in the grid
I memorized in May. Cars weaved tight waves to warm the tires.
Tom Carnegie announced the green flag dropped
and all we could see from Turn 3 was a quarter million people
looking at Turn 2 awaiting cars to catapult onto the backstretch
and fan three or four wide for 5/8 of a mile
before diving the Turn 3 line to old apron or new rumble strip,
the cars pulsing like blood from the heart.
Over 200 laps, I played games, let cars blur across my still eyes,
swung my neck to sight cars through the apex.
I marveled at physics, downforce, aerodynamics, momentum,
at keeping the pedal down. I stared at the short chute to glimpse
a rare pass, regretted my hopes that a driver would overcook
the entrance to 3 like they did coming out of 2.
On the white-flag lap, I squinted at the glimmer of Turn 4
we could see from our seats and closed my eyes,
imagined winning and waving the checkered flag over the winner,
the yard of bricks we all would kneel down to kiss.

—Kevin McKelvey, Indianapolis, IN

From the author: I was full-on obsessed with the Indy 500 all through my childhood and teenage years. Attending the race and later the Brickyard 400 was something my family, especially my mother, loved to do. I'm excited to see the renewed tradition of a poem published in the program.