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## Alphabet Soup Stuart Dybek

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## Stuart Dybek

### ALPHABET SOUP

In this place the soup was what one came for—alphabet soup for the Language poets—and a clear broth for everyone else. Here, ordering a steaming bowl of soup could be like visiting an oracle. Soup was a kind of lens—"a monacle for the mouth," in the unforgettable phrase of the renowned poet-dentist, Victor Guzman, DDS.

Despite its storefront appearance, it wasn't just another ethnic restaurant. It was too cosmopolitan for that. American poets of the International school table-hopped, suavely reciting their poems in what sounded like English translations. In those days, the so-called One-of-the-Boys-Gang of surrealists ate there, too. Do you remember them? I didn't think so.

Adjacent to the restrooms, an old phone booth to which plywood siding had been hammered and a cross affixed, served as a makeshift confessional that the unrepentant Confessional poets lined up to dine in, kneeling before their soup as if it could forgive them. A table in a corner, way in the back, with only a single chair was where the Hermetics ate—one at a time. The Academics frequented another place, just across the street, Bloom's Deli, where the bored Mrs. Bloom said nothing beyond *yes yes yes*, punctuated by an occasional *oy vey* as her customers deconstructed the brisket.

Ah! these allusions of grandeur!

At all the little tables, hunched over simmering controversies, various groups of poets slurped their soup. They had gathered like opposing, neighborhood softball teams gather at a neutral corner tavern after their games on Friday night in order to recount their exploits, to total and retotal the score, to study the rankings and their own particular statistics, to ascribe errors, dissect reputations, erect legends. Instead of Bud's Bombers or the Popes of Pilsen Park, they had names like the Formalist Stokers, the Regionalist Whackers, the Multi-cultural Pounders, and the Dukes of Deep Image. The greasy light of soup illuminated their faces and made their eyes gleam. There were the Beats, sipping soup from a burbling hookah, the Political Poets memorializing the exploited between brimming mouthfuls, and the One-of-the-Girls-Gang of women poets, their spoons all clacking until invariably

from some table or other someone would cry, "Garçon! there's a fly in my soup!"

A rare silence would befall the room, all eyes watching as the Garçon comes rushing to the table.

"There's a fly in my soup!"

"I see," the Garçon says. "Allow me," and he reaches into the bowl, unzips the soup's fly, and a penis, limp as a noodle, floats out.

"I say, what sort of soup have you served me? Take it away, take it to that empty window table reserved for the audience."