

## *The Scent of Rose Water*

A snake sneaked into the jungle behind the brownstone  
on the Lower East Side where we all still lived.  
It was an anaconda crossed with a silverfish  
whose tendrils shimmered from the cherry tree  
in the little dooryard behind the summer kitchen.  
When his clumsy partner-in-crime the armadillo came  
to help him attack the children and my wife and me,  
I absented myself in search of the rifle that I kept  
in the great house on Jefferson Street in the Seventies.  
I climbed up through the door to the stairway  
that wound into the secret loft on the third floor,  
where I used to watch for you through the curved panes.  
The gun was bigger and rustier than I remembered  
from the last time I took it from the closet under the eaves.  
A lovely little nickel-plated pistol also found itself  
in my loose-fitting Army jacket, where it went off  
and blew apart its pocket and a hole in my jeans,  
barely missing the flesh of my right thigh,  
which would have crippled me, but instead I ran  
all the way from Kansas to New York City  
with the whole right leg of my jeans on fire.  
The snake and the armadillo had removed elsewhere.  
You stood in the pewter light of the dining area  
arranging a spray of lyrical hibiscus on the water  
that you had poured into a crystal bowl  
from your mother's silver pitcher engraved with the line  
*A Thing of Beauty Is a Joy Forever.*  
The bowl had been her Aunt Elizabeth's.  
Except for the little girl who died at home  
and was buried in a shoebox in the garden,

## *An Evening Walk*

Inside an ashy flatland the color of dread  
I began to savor the way the outside tasted—

a blend of sweet basil and fresh-rubbed thyme,  
an erudite soupçon of tarragon in the palate,

a lemony finish that rinsed the senses  
in the memory of a walk up a lane in Somerset

between Wrington and Goblin Coombe  
beside a yellow pasture with a few cows

downhill from an impetuous purple oak,  
a church tower behind it and beyond the tower

blue gone to slate—not many years ago,  
scarcely a moment, as events return,

a daw feather fallen into a weave of thorn  
among some chestnuts by the roadside.

## *The Art of Self-Defense*

Another day's stint in the free world  
begins here in the donut shop. Standing in line  
wondering how many cheese Danish and apple fritters  
as well as donuts I should buy, while the creamy girls  
in their summer dresses are licking their profiteroles,  
I see myself as a boy in the summer of 1953  
salting sliced tomatoes with my grandfather  
in the white shirt he wore. The kitchen was big and sweet.  
The breeze from the electric fan swung by us and away.  
The oilcloth on the table was cool and slick.  
The leaves of the tree of heaven dappled the sill.  
In line in the donut shop is a man in a straw hat  
between a woman in pigtails and a boy with large eyes.  
Gramps was a boxer in his younger days, semiprofessional.  
He watched the Wednesday night fights on our TV.  
In his last autumn he taught me to box.  
He set up punching bags in his basement.  
He taped newspapers to the windows. He named me Spike.  
He got me to shadowbox next to the coal bin.  
He kept me at it hard till it felt like forever.  
When the time came, he arranged a bout  
with Mike Donnelly from down the street.  
Mike struck the top of my head at once and down I came.  
He helped me up from the floor and went home.  
I was eleven. I wasn't fast or clever. This was the autumn  
after the summer they fried the Rosenbergs.  
Gramps walked me down to the corner to get the *Free Press*.  
The photograph showed their bodies on the front page.  
He tugged my hand and kept me from seeing it.  
We mark these solitudes throughout our lives.

This is not simply about things as they are.  
This is about donuts, profiteroles, and straw hats.  
Things cannot be as they are in this country.

## *At the Bureau of Divine Music*

The whole day I hung around in the sky over Russia  
was a Wednesday in October. No one looked up  
with any semblance of regard from the heroic Russian people.

I had flown from Paris to visit the faubourgs  
of Omsk, Irkutsk, Novosibirsk, but they were filled  
with a smother of blue coal fires, shadows of shadows

coughing up tendrils of gray phlegm onto ice floes  
that passed for boulevards, back alleys, byways  
that ended in country lanes over the Urals

to Ulan Bator and the Mongolian grasslands.  
What is the object of going but to bring back free  
toothbrushes, peach-bloom porcelains, and colorful boxes

of sandalwood soaps from marble-tiled hotel baths  
with the only water pressure in Datong or Yingxian?  
Never mind photographs. As my old friend Ray used to say,

tapping his forehead, the pictures you take in here  
are the best ones. I don't know how we got there,  
but rather than walk back the way we came,

we rambled down the long path from the Temple of Heaven  
to a park with sad trees and a moat, and across the moat  
a yellow palisade. Nobody else was around.

If unearthly voices fluttered out to us on the swell of wind,  
we couldn't hear them. Should the sociopathic cabdriver  
drive himself to Heaven after taking us home, his cadaver

## *The Consecration of the House*

I took a soak November 22nd.  
John Kennedy was dead forty-five years.  
I would be sixty-five in the same month's time  
it took me to turn twenty-one that year  
and go out with my father for a drink  
at Tommy Burke's on Vernor in Detroit.  
There I was in the tub we have upstairs  
and thinking on the soul in good hot water,  
the way some lines of Yeats advised me to,  
and I felt certain it was about time,  
a bit too late, or both, or none of these.

That morning I read "The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid."  
Kusta ben Luka—doctor, philosopher—  
unburdens to a Christian friend of his,  
and tells him how the gift the Caliph brought him  
could sleeptalk on a range of sacred matters  
his age had driven him to care about,  
regardless of what had seemed impossible,  
along with things the girl could do awake  
that made him wonder what the Caliph meant.  
Before half of this monologue elapses,  
Kusta reveals how certain people's souls  
appear to radiate from within their bodies.  
I longed to learn exactly how that happens,  
which ministered to an impulse to search out  
Parmenides' or Yeats's allegory  
left on the bookshelf where the Caliph kept  
genial visions to be sought for comfort.  
Somebody here knew something worth the knowing.

And here it was a Saturday in November,  
with the first fire down in the grate, my wife  
working her crossword puzzle, me in the tub,  
the sun sparkling the window in the bathroom,  
the weather apt to warm up later on.  
I kicked the suds around until they died.  
The quiet dropped again. And then I knew  
why water is the generated soul,  
and why from downstairs Ann would ask to find  
the word *to be* in French, which I spelled out,  
and added, "It's also the word for *being*,  
as in *L'Être et le Néant* by Jean-Paul Sartre,"  
as if she welcomed too much information,  
which in that case I was quite sure she hadn't.  
"And don't forget the circumflex on the *E*."  
"How did I know you'd tell me that?" she said.  
I thought she said it. I could not be sure,  
for all the house between us and the way  
the waters round had calmed me body and soul,  
to keep on going onward, at a loss.

It wasn't about that day or the day's date.  
Nothing about it was what we thought it was.  
To keep on being or to be or not  
to be were not the matter. They were all  
beside the point. Once we had got the point,  
the point itself would be beside the point.  
When Kennedy took a sharp left onto Elm,  
seconds before his brains burst from his head,  
time went off where it came from, leaving him

the moment that his soul had left to shine through him and out of him. The overpass would darken him soon enough out of sight, into more quiet than he knew already.