

III

Or maybe, the X, white with ragged edges,
Was the differential in a numbers game — maybe this was it.
That where, for the First Cause, Y once stood,
Now X stands, is value
For the lesser effects of love
As when a dreamer dreams and pie-in-the-sky attracts
The grosser appetites, as when the dreamer is not Villon
But that the dream-set might be set
in Queens or Bangkok.

IV

His right hand muzzled a glass of wine —
That zealous right hand of the old buzzard,
His left arm glued to the table, an administrator to time.
And his voice was nasal and his jokes were trite
And so, this much had yet to change
with a *bon vivant*.
Petulah at the counter, beginning to founder
from her cargo of hilarity,
Once a party girl, getting to be a bitter jade,
Grabbed at her Medusa-like curls, some adagio in her fine mind
run amok.

VIII

So maybe, the sirens of emergency response were it,
Maybe, the radio with songs and skits
Designed to keep the cash-flow flowing
And encourage a responsible pursuit of sin
And a rational appropriation of joy
 and less ambitious delights —
God a burned-out shell of a gentleman loner,
His eyes as unblinking as a reptile's, taking in a vast sweep of terrain
And the Ministry of Health's
 relentless propaganda.

IX

Then again, maybe the umbrella in the street,
Kicked around somewhat, was it,
A malignant flower, a fallen star,
A discarded article bespeaking feminine grace
 from the sunny state of Georgia.

X

Yes, whatever *it was*, maybe, it was due
 to a woman, after all, Petulah there
Too weary for love, too tired to resist
The advances of a railroad worker, but that she, even so, was
 some kind of keeper of a faith.

XI

Or maybe Lennie, our unofficial rabbi, would
connect us to God,
But Lennie was sweating in the heat
On account of his fears and corpulence,
The humid air a shroud.
Maybe it was all this that brought
The beginning to us: Stalinist bravura, pious love feast,
light's pulverizing hammer.

XII

Even so, Nick the cook, unabashed Greek, he swore in his mother's tongue
In a thought-impooverished moment
That, nonetheless, outpaced the intellect
As he surveyed the bitches and the whoresons
that were his means to making a living.

XIII

Then pig-tailed Jimmy, a trucker once,
Made light of anxiety, hunger, and the scene.
Eggs benedict was what he'd eat,
That is, if he were as < ch as Croesus.

Hey, that's it, eggs benedict. Waitress, take my order.

XIV

And the blondes in blush-pink sandals spoke
Of redemption, slid into the subject easily
As though all their lives they had debated
clerics and mullahs and bailiffs,

XV

Those babes for whom a god of old
Made the world in under a week,
For whom TV guarantees much, *and self-esteem*,
And redemption was, well, it amounted to
paths of least resistance, and

XVI

The blondes in blush-pink sandals could,
While wriggling toes, bide their time
Until the boyfriends were let loose from jail.
Lennie rocked in his chair, incredulous,
Wishing, maybe, to add to his little band of true believers.

XVII

Marilou and Agatha wore
Enormous earrings — this equipage
Lent them a Rembrandtian air.
They had kindly smiles — Marilou and Agatha, and they were bohemian
even if Marilou was a realtor.
They dined often with Lenny,
And they looked after him, tightening his suspenders
and helping him with his buttons . . .

XVIII

Oh, they might have broken into psalm right then and there
for the beginning that was to come,
But that they were spinsters and oversexed
And they were hard up and celibate
And they were swell sports and vicious losers,
as intense as squirrels,

XIX

And they were intimidated and lost
To imaginings such as loneliness breeds:
That the streak in Marilou's spiffy, new hairstyle
 was gold and it was obscene.
So that maybe, in another life, she used to officiate
 at subterranean rites
Performed against the backdrop
Of architectural fantasies, *Lennie their baby, their orphan, their link*
 with time out of mind.

XX

Maybe the chairs freshly cushioned, painted black,
Maybe the new paint job on the walls
That took longer to complete than had been advertised . . .
Maybe, this was it, a way of going forward
 one futility at a time.

XXI

Mrs D, a lover in her own eyes
if in no one else's, squirmed in her running togs
As she sat with her coffee and cigarette. Maybe, knock wood, she'd
find a man,
One who'd be fun when fun was needed
And all boot when a *boot* was required
To attend to matters of state and business.
She looked for a man for her boudoir,
But men are the occasion of so much mess
And this was to her dismay
and discomfort.

XXII

Nickles, a lover in his own eyes
if in no one else's,
Idolater of the Enlightenment even now, ran everything
to ground and spat
On personal virtue, mind, and art, on all who passed themselves off
As being in possession of the articles above —
egregious frauds —
As he passed by in his usual funk
And slagged a modernist in the window,

XXIII

And Lalah, the relief cook, swore
In his mother's tongue, and it was as though
The café, a seesaw, teetered — in its search for balance —
On the sharpest peak of the Hindu Kush.

XXIV

It was as though the world would attack the world
And time, diverted from itself, would flow back
to itself.

XXV

Maybe, the cars splashing through the rain
Were the thing, that, and the thunder and the fact
life is a constellate arrangement.

XXVI

So that maybe, it was the faces you see in dreams,
That float up at you in dreams, and you the dreamer say,
"I told you they'd behave like that
And even I didn't believe it."
Diners twirled spaghetti.

XXVII

And it was the opinion of a connoisseur,
Of a greasy-haired, amateur theologian named Roger,
That Tammy the Devastater was gifted
With the best legs he'd ever seen,
But that the rest of her
Was gloss and commentary.

XXVIII

"What?" I said. "Her eyes," I said, "the set of her jaw . . .
She could make love all day and still run a marathon.
She could manage a business with complete attention and tender care,
And then lay off staff a day before Christmas,"
Her eyes the color of fool's gold, flowers peppering the wide,
wide boulevards of time . . .

*On that day, it was only the heat
That was making us crazy.*

XXIX

And maybe the rooms were it, the rooms in which you and I reside,
Rooms being the structures that contain
The skeptics within the spiritual
In sight of the valley of the cradle
And the precipice of the grave.
Even so, rooms bring to the door
busybodies, thieves, zealots.

XXX

Maybe it was the rain that fell.
A house of cards was a citadel.
Nick the cook squeezed Mrs D,
That is, he massaged her shoulder, and she
Very nearly sobbed from the gravity
Of the occasion, and she had a dog to walk,
 an adolescent to castigate.

XXXI

Maybe it was the lovebirds who, day after day,
Courtied one another in the café, how their lips met and parted
In a prelude to calamity, he a purveyor of illegal potions and she his reason
 for gratitude.
And their eyes grew wise, taking stock.

XXXII

Maybe it was the twilight, the ricocheting rain, the flowers fleetingly
beautiful
On the wide, wide boulevards of time. Maybe it was that
 but maybe it was not.

XXXIII

And the wide boulevards of time were flower-strewn,
Yet, it was just the same, old street outside.
Trucks bounced along. Lennie rocked in his chair.
Salt was sprinkled. Beer was thin.

XXXIV

And Tammy the Devastater in shorts stood up
And men winced to see her limbs,
And she grinned, her mood better now,
And life got rich for a few mechanics,
And God drummed his fingers
on an arborite surface.

XXXV

So maybe, here it was, possible perfections for a brief portion of time:
A perfect morsel of smoked meat, a perfectly executed quip,
An old man doggedly carrying on
Even if he might die, just sitting there,
reading a book,

XXXVI

Tammy so fetching, that evening, irrespective of character
and the travails of her soul.

But it was as though nothing had come before

To tell us what to take or leave

By way of the evils and the felicities.

It's always like this

And now it's September

And we are at sea.