

Matisse · *Edward Hirsch*

To begin with a light as vivid and warm  
As the strong brown hands of my mother  
Braiding my grandmother's hair  
For a Saturday night dance in the country.  
All over the house there are preparations:  
In the basement my grandfather is soaping  
His gray beard in a thick mist rising  
From the water in a steamy iron tub;  
Upstairs my sister is trying on her pink shoes  
And red slip, and her red shoes and  
Pink slip, and her orange dress. Outside  
I am watching my peasant friend Talosha  
Trying to teach my eldest brother Claude  
A real Polish polka. Father says it is  
As hopeless as trying to teach a French pear  
Sapling to grow Moroccan apples. Everyone laughs.  
Everyone. I'd like to begin with a light  
As warm and vivid as that laughter.

And I'd like to end with the red interior  
Of an enormous country house blazing with lights  
For the dance. My grandfather is wearing  
A string tie someone sent him from America,  
My grandmother is drinking real peach brandy  
In a coffee cup. My mother is dressed  
In a dress the color of crushed strawberries  
And my sister has decided on a navy skirt  
With a red sash and a bright red scarf tied  
Around her neck. Even my brother can't take  
His eyes off her. And me? Well, I'm drunk.  
I am whirling around and around the dance floor  
With Talosha until the bright peasant blouses  
Become a steady blur circling on the walls,  
A dizzy whirling of lights and stars. And then  
My father carries me upstairs and puts me  
In an enormous double bed with satin sheets.  
And then nothing else but sleep. And this:

All night I hear the music in my head;  
All my life I dream of dancers whirling  
Through the trees like colorful wild beasts.