

THE LOVERS

Imagine them there in the rain forest
in a wide blue hammock called a *matrimonial*
swung between trees, and it is not raining.
But the laughter could be mistaken for rain
and repeated endlessly high among the leaves
by brilliant birds whose feathers are treasures.
Even so, word of joy travels back to the plains
and high to the heavens to be kept
for those days when there is no laughter at all.

LEAVING THE BISTRO

What a performance at midnight—that old *clochard*—
greybeard beside his bike standing before the outdoor bistro
tables, a one-man circus trying to sell his shirts,
unfurling them like sail, tugging them to show
they are strong. No luck. So he sings loud songs,
then plays the flute, the toy harmonica. He had
Ginsberg beaten by far. Stripped to his shorts,
cupping in hands what he could find there, not much,
he jiggled his hips, bent over and kissed
a young man with a black beard, greybeard on black.
And the audience was aghast with their beers,
coffees, loving him and so reluctant to admit it.
Hadn't he made the great sacrifice, brought all
they needed—someone to laugh at? So much better
a show than those they had paid for! And no need
to dress up. Yet when he doffed and passed
his beret, no coins were thrown in, only one butt
of a cigarette, flicked with contempt. But undaunted,
he lifted a beer mug, half full and left, glugged it down,
then plucked up a cube of free sugar, crunched it
with glee, patted his flat belly, bronze from the sun,
flat from biking up mountains. He was Pan

and the bourgeois still fought him. One fat woman
was mortally offended, rose and swayed off
down the street, her poodle in arms. At last
he gave up, attached with bands all his bundles,
Those wrapped in shirts, sheets, old rags—
they fitted all over his bike. Then as if he stood
in a forest, none of us there, gawking, whispering,
he splattered his pee on the gravel, lifted his leg
over the bike. Once more he inspected those faces,
bugs whirling around them. Scratched his ass,
and was off into the night, wheels wobbling.
And me sitting there wishing I had proudly walked over
and given ten francs and my blessings. Walking home
late toward the grove of grey olives
I thought how we had scorned him. Pan
had offered himself in the chill of that autumn
and we had scorned and betrayed him—not even one coin.

Vence