

We had been laughing.
I remember the blue tablecloth.
Our empty glasses were filling with sunlight.
There was a bowl full of ripe plums.

MME. SPERIDES

*Alexandria, 1956, after the
nationalization of the Suez Canal
and all foreign capital*

Perhaps her cook, come under the influence
Of a few discreet piasters, had spoken
Too indiscreetly. Or just perhaps,
On a hot day along the azure of the Mediterranean,
Rue Fouad bearing a stream of traffic
To Muhammed Ali Square in a riot
Of claxons and shouts, and the whole city
Gleaming white as it must have from a distance,
Perhaps on such a day, someone got lucky
And Mme. Sperides at the customs house
Could sense what price she would have to pay,
That the official full of apologies
And gold teeth, would usher her into
A private room smelling of dark tobacco,
That under the drone of the ceiling fans
Her valises would be searched, the linings
Cut out, the cowhide ripped back.
That despite her protests which would be
Useless but obligatory, she herself
Would be stripped, that finally,
Two large diamonds worth a modest villa
Would peek and shine from the elegant crack
Of her ass.

Whatever the story,
It was not for a boy to know.

I listened at my grandmother's door
As she spoke in a whisper, thieving
A fragment here a word there *naked*
Jewels hidden you know where though I didn't
And tried to call up all I remembered:
Mme. Sperides in her salon serving us
Tea and the small cucumber sandwiches
Whose flavor always reminded me of paste.
Mme. Sperides falling easily back in her chair,
Crossing her legs, intoning:
"You know what my husband left me.
It is not much to live on in these times."
Mme. Sperides ringing for her servants
Who swished in and out in their galabiyas,
Expressionless, almost invisible,
Bringing us fruits and petit fours.
And now, Mme. Sperides naked, jewels hidden
Somewhere in my imagination, somewhere
In the words my grandmother whispered
And I smuggled out with my ear at the door,
Holding my breath, thinking the world
Would suddenly reveal itself with one
Prize word, some dark knowledge.
"I love you, Mme. Sperides," I tried
With a small boy's passion, believing
That was enough to bring her secretly
To me, translucent and shimmering.
But when I closed my eyes in my fever,
All I could see was Mme. Sperides laden
With rings and pearls, bracelets and brooches,
Mme. Sperides hidden by jewelry and clothing,
Something else hidden beyond all that.
All I could taste was cucumber.
All I could hear was the undercurrent
Of long robes swishing from room to room.