

To have my hay in for the winter,"
Just that, though your eyes betray
What you keep to yourself and hidden.
It's the old story of time and weather,
How too much water can cure a thirst
Beyond its wants, how some this summer
Have lost their first crop to the rain,
How some will lose the second, the cut hay
Rotting and fungal in the sodden fields,
How some may lose both, the farm, themselves.
You've timed this harvest right. Had luck.
Enough to go on for another season.
Enough, at least, to make you say,
Though ruin will in time undo us,
"It feels good." It is enough
To sit beside you
And hear you say it.

AGAMI BEACH

Alexandria, 1955

There were the black flags flying
All along the beach and we knew
We could not swim. There was the sea
Turning too dark and churlish
And there was someone wading in
Too far and standing for a moment
Half in air, half in water.
There was the sand shifting easily
Under his heels and the current
Sweeping him out and out.
There were the cabanas and the sound
Of my sister crying and my feet
Were burning as I ran toward them
But there was my father moving already

Rope in hand sprinting to the water's
Edge and plunging into the sea.
There was my sister crying
"Don't let him go, don't let him die"
And I grew angry at feeling
Her fear, hearing those words.
There was the long line of watchers
And my father's head weaving
In and out of the waves, his arm
Around the other, a speck of light
In the darkness. There was the fear
I shook off as my father
Shook off the sea emerging,
Dragging the body along the hot white sand.
There was the skin blue like water,
There were fingernails the color of plums.
There was my father standing above it
Spent and awkward and full of mercy.
There were the people running toward it
From all directions and there was someone
Pulling us away and my sister crying
"Take it back, take it back!"
It was getting dark. The sea-birds
Were calling to one another, diving,
And no one was moving.

Years later,

My sister would suddenly say:
"The colors were all wrong.
I remember the day by its colors."
We were sitting at a table
All afternoon drinking wine
And calling up one name after another
Of friends we had almost forgotten.
Mourad, Nadia, where were they now?
We had been telling old stories
About ourselves, our lives.

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.