

The Picasso Poem · Gerald Stern

It was when the bridal wreaths were all out and
those smelly weeds, the graduation speakers,
were blooming on one green lawn after another
that I sat on my porch trying to make up my mind
about the Pablo Picasso I loved the most.
It was Sunday morning and the *New York Times*
was full of his glory; it was Sunday
and the skinny runners were out
and the iris were combing their tiny beards
and the lilacs were waving a dark goodby.
I wanted to drive a 1936 Pontiac
to New York City to see the exhibition.
I wanted to drive through sweet New Jersey with the picnic
basket bumping my knee and the line of trees
keeping the sun out from Phillipsburg to Newark.
Over and over again I thought of him
in the 1930s and I thought of the paintings
he did and I thought of the France he loved,
all plump and modern and corrupt.
He was 55 in 1936 and slipping
through the silence before his next flowering;
he was moving from one hard place to another,
dipping his hand and smearing the white canvas.
—I think I'd have to choose between the woman
with a hat or the one with rope for a face
or the one reclining—with stars—or the one in a nightmare
ripping apart a handkerchief;
or maybe the goat; or maybe the bicycle handle.
On June ninth I stood peacefully in line
waiting to crawl through the numbered rooms.
I was so quiet little birds were resting
on my soft shoulder and little leaves were growing
from my legs and arms.
Somewhere, inside my chest, a heart was pounding,
and I was listening again, a little thinner
and a little whiter than the last time.
I walked through the birches, I walked through the dry rain,
I bent down and ran my fingers
through the black dirt. Three hours from then

I would walk down that line from the other side,
dreaming—I think—of my own next darkness.
God save Fifth Avenue, God save New York
from my assault. God let me drive
across the Pulaski Skyway singing those great
songs; leaning out the little window
and staring down at the Jersey swamp;
smelling that sulphur; driving up into the sun
and looking back on those iron lamps; looking forward
over and over to the future, streets in the sky,
towers in the ground, dancing people, little
dogs for every family. I waver between
that world and this. I travel back and forth
between the two. I lose myself
and crawl off singing or come back crying,
my face wet with misery, my eyes deep holes
where the dream was lost, my hands up in their favorite
position, the two unbroken fingers
cutting the air,
thirty feet above the river,
beside the hostas and the mugho pine,
the dirty bottles and the stones
fixing the boundary for another summer.