

Tea Dance at the Nautilus Hotel (1925)

After a watercolor by Donald Justice

The gleam of eyes under the striped umbrellas—
We see them still, after so many years,
(Or think we do)—the young men and their dears,
Banding forward glances as through masks
In the curled bluish haze of panatellas,
And taking nips from little silver flasks.

They sit at tables as the sun is going,
Bent over cigarettes and lukewarm tea,
Talking small talk, gossip and gallantry,
Some of them single, some husbands and wives,
Laughing and telling stories, all unknowing
They sit there in the heyday of their lives.

And some then dance off in the late sunlight,
Lips brushing cheeks, hands growing warm in hands,
Feet gliding at the lightest of commands,
All summer on their caught or sighing breath
As they whirl on toward the oncoming night,
And nothing further from their thoughts than death.

But they danced here sixty-five years ago!—
Almost all of them must be underground.
Who could be left to smile at the sound
Of the oldfangled dance tunes and each pair
Of youthful lovers swaying to and fro?
Only a dreamer, who was never there.

—Robert Mezey