

DHARMA IN SANTA MONICA

The endless platinum flash of the AMEX card
reminds the bored waitress of the Pacific,
the one Cortez discovered
standing on end like a neon sign.

Stranded in Santa Monica
(where, the joke goes, there's no Santa
but plenty of Monicas),
with his twelve-cylinder BMW,

a cellular phone to call down the wrath of the bookies,
breakfast in a booth at the Polo Lounge,
a writer orders his \$5 oatmeal.
It arrives with a bone-china bowl

of sliced bananas. Through floor-to-ceiling glass,
all summer an arthritic tree has been strung
with Christmas lights ("That
is a schematic diagram of an agent's heart,"

he says to his guest).
In his neighborhood, the lawns are evenly brushed
by Kabuki gardeners.
A house he drives by each morning

may be bulldozed by afternoon.
Then the real work begins,
the scripting.
Early mornings a TV star

not known for her chastity or moral beauty
may be seen jogging downhill.
Secret knowledge
is a hot tip that comes in at 4-1.

At the track, stableboys bring out the deferential horses,
their knees suspect,
the jockeys knowing nothing
of the old arts, just how to hang on for victory,

hoping to beat the odds,
the computerized predictions of the rag-heads,
hoping to turn two \$6000 victories
on an \$8000 horse,

before cortisone burns out the joints.
For a moment the crowd parts
for the elderly fascist roué father
of a much admired starlet

who no longer speaks to him.
He squires an even younger starlet on his arm.
The crowd closes in.
The common life is not so common now.