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*from THE LAST BOHEMIAN OF AVENUE A*

I'm a sucker for begonias.  
Yeah, winter was hell  
but now springtime  
tangos me into the night,  
& wine-drinking weather  
is here, not any old rotgut  
with an indelible drawl.  
If this isn't a foolproof  
paradise, then I am  
in a speakeasy of white  
noise, & not one star  
seen in this rigmarole  
of neon & disquiet.  
Roscoe, why are you  
gazing at me with a hard  
question in your eyes?  
We used to be serene  
as two lotus-eaters  
could be, not so  
counterrevolutionary  
in this secular season.

I woke at daybreak,  
saying, Barabbas Jones,  
you're born to witness  
the unheard-of, in a place  
& time where one stands  
framed in a picture within  
a picture, gazing out  
at the stray poppies  
of bedlam.

Are you trying to read  
my mind again, huh?  
You look like Socrates  
begging for the hemlock,  
but you should be happy  
we have a rent-control  
roof over our heads.  
The landlord would be  
elated to kick us out  
on the damn streets  
to eat caviar outta  
garbage cans, señor.

You see, in this age  
one man's downfall  
can be another man's  
foxtrot. Why the heck  
are you looking at me  
like that, Roscoe?  
I know I gave you  
your prime cut  
& two green pills  
at sunrise. I know  
we must go to the vet  
& see why your eyes  
are changing color.  
I wish you could tell me  
if you only see gray  
paradoxes like a tomcat.  
Oh man, I have a surprise  
for you, & it doesn't  
have anything to do  
with a sunny bordello  
of whimsical need, gala,  
or tropical servitude.

You have to know  
in your animal way  
why I'm jumping up  
& down inside myself.  
There was a time if I  
wished for something  
out of this world  
it would accost me  
on the next block —  
outrageous & pearly.  
But we can't forget  
the landlord's decree  
of hounds smelling  
blood. Maybe I'm a fool,  
& I should've moved  
to B or D years ago.  
Now Charlie's house  
on the corner is selling  
for a dancer's arm & leg.

Look at you —  
once you were marked,  
numbered, & tagged  
at the pound, but since  
we been hanging out  
these years, you're almost  
a half-wild mutt overtaken  
by the Lord's solicitude.  
I used to be a boomerang  
out there, lost in a world  
of plenty. Yes. No. Damn!  
What's this pain in my side,  
Roscoe? All these zings  
& zaps use me as a rod  
to ground radio waves  
on a polar red icecap.

I can feel it in my body.  
Now, Sheila used to say,  
Rabbas, one blue moon  
you'll wish you never ran  
up & down these streets  
paved in tar & brimstone.  
Look, please stop dancing  
& just be a damn dog.  
Forget Sheila. She's fat  
& happy out in Orange,  
New Jersey, preening  
under a big sweet gum  
& sighing over Clark Kent  
as a quick-change artist  
in a telephone booth.  
I bet she hasn't touched  
the cello since we kissed  
& waved a last good-bye.  
With your little howl  
we were a mind-bending trio.  
Which human voice you wish?  
Do you want to hear the tenor,  
baritone, the alto, or soprano  
this morning? Look at you  
looking at me as a lost soul.  
When we first rescued you  
from the pound in Queens  
they were calling you Mister,  
but Sheila thought  
you were a Roscoe,  
& it fits like a bat's wing  
on a dark basement wall.  
You're suppose to see  
everything near & far,  
low & high. I know  
the changing of colors  
can make one think

he's one of King Philip's soldiers  
returning from battle  
with his eyes plucked out.

Look, even if you're a dog  
don't you know history?  
No, I'm not going off  
my rocker. I was reading  
Joseph Roth last night,  
& his voice is in my head —  
he's a funny cat  
living out of two suitcases.  
I couldn't stop laughing.  
A dog seated on a man's  
back, what kinda stunt  
is that, huh? Now, don't  
look all egoistical, every  
reference point isn't you.  
The Victrola is history,  
& I believe you know  
I have seen capital life  
with its barbed tail  
jabbed into its mouth.

Look, Sheila & me — we  
went to shrinks galore  
& even a guru or two  
at the Spiritual House,  
but we found nothing  
worked as well as one  
or two hours of “A Love  
Supreme” & “All Blues.”  
Someone hoodwinked her  
with the idea we were living  
in sin at the end of the world.

I said, Honey, if I die before you  
I'll station a ghost at your door,  
& you can forget all  
the belly-laughing tapes  
& the temple of gongs.  
Sometimes I'd see her  
whispering to Chantilly  
who began to see herself  
as some back-door idol  
but I don't go for that jive.  
I know, they used to call me  
a fool, but my credentials  
are impeccable when it  
comes to romance.

Did you notice they took  
down the bronze plaque  
from Yardbird's house?  
But no one can make me  
forget the sound of his alto,  
how he rode a spotted horse  
with a full moon sweating  
a glow of brass. The man  
lived. I wonder if I dare  
to steal some feeling  
out of naked September  
when I pass that house.  
I could hear him cursing  
& pleading to impresarios  
who thought they owned  
the century's subterranean  
masters of cakewalk.

I was thinking nature  
pulls us toward the vortex,



& then looked up to see  
Sheila at the corner,  
lugging along a cello.  
She turned & said, If you  
are following me, at least  
you could be a gentleman  
& help carry this cross.  
The next day she brought  
over this begonia in a taxicab,  
& we sat here sipping cognac  
& talking The Second Sex,  
Being & Nothingness,  
& Judas Priest, & before  
I could guess whackamo  
I was a shy baby seal lost  
in a fish market on Friday  
at daybreak, & Debussy  
was in my bloodstream.  
I was held in the bridled  
sway of a woman's hips.  
I understood I couldn't  
take the damn iron bit  
out of my mouth if I tried,  
but I'd never be blind fish  
for anyone's last supper.

Don't look at me like that,  
Roscoe. You make me think  
of what I've seen, a refrain  
of light & dark, the Hudson  
running through birch  
& sweet gum, the years  
of ups & downs in my head.  
Sometimes I wet a reed  
on my tongue, close my eyes  
& rock back on my heels,

& I play the way it was  
before this was a boon  
of souls among old world  
fortunetellers, rag pickers,  
feather merchants, & two-bit  
speculators lost in the scent  
of wild spices. I let myself go  
with the quartet, & here I am.

When I got sick last year  
I swear I saw a smile  
in the landlord's eyes,  
but I outfoxed the joker.  
I had squirreled away  
enough nuts for winter.  
This was his last chance  
to lob cream off the top,  
& I thought the bastard  
was going to tiptoe down  
from Lucifer's penthouse  
& knife me in my sleep,  
but it would be a helluv  
death-hold at the brink,  
& that is what pulled me  
up on my feet to fend off  
tigers & lions in the fog.  
I'm not going to name him  
because you would accuse me,  
but no one can tell you I don't  
adore calligraphy & jade vases  
from the Ming Dynasty.

A look at the homeless  
on these half-broken streets  
makes me see Jesus

as a born-again socialist  
thrashing moneychangers  
& harlots from the temple.  
These days, I lose myself  
in lush public gardens  
refusing to pretty-up  
the agony of things.  
Sometimes, old boy,  
we just don't know  
if the cut of a jacket  
is right.

Look, why are you cocking  
your head that way, huh?  
You want to get out & chase  
your dream-rabbit around  
the park double time?  
Are you ever going to use  
your amazing six sense  
against crooked laws  
of time & false luster,  
goat pellets for food?  
You look like you need  
another piece of juicy,  
fresh, bloody meat,  
the best money can buy.

Some of us weather storms  
hard to believe, but I know  
when the sickness came here  
to Alphabet City, my friend  
Joe Top used to say, Rabbas,  
He's sorting out buckwheat  
from the chaff, & I'd say,  
Man, we're in this together,

& if we ain't, we're already  
at the end of our towline.  
When he fell into night fever  
I didn't miss a day visiting him  
up there on the third floor.

When I first met Sheila  
she rode a blue bicycle  
& posed over at The Studio,  
but one night, I said, Look,  
I don't have a jealous bone  
in my body, & she grinned  
& said, I'm a good woman,  
Rabbas. That summer sprung  
a tune I was born to carry  
beyond earthly dominion,  
into cold burning toward  
forgiveness, & I followed.  
I don't know about you  
but in show business,  
you really have to grip  
your moral compass. Look,  
I saw you eyeing the poodle.  
I could feel you tugging  
& whining on your rope  
leash, but you must forget  
your three-fifths of a man  
psychosis, because you won't  
believe things seen & heard  
when lights are turned out.

Have I ever served you  
any processed meat  
or goulash out of a tin can?  
Maybe a silver-blue quail

every other now & then  
spooked from a flaming bush.  
You eat good as a prince.  
Well, at least you're not  
the infamous scapegoat  
everyone calls Brother.

Roscoe, would you please  
stop your jigging around  
this floor, as if you're all  
tied up in monkey meat.  
I remember when you  
would still be out there  
in the dead cold, your tail  
uncurled like a grace note,  
dreaming of a soup bone,  
happy as a wolf in a snow-  
storm. But now what's left  
is only style. It's not a way  
of being, & my few friends  
still alive — we're knocking  
on wood — are damn good  
metaphysical detectives.