

HAROLD SKULSKY
BIRTHDAY POEM

Mornings at six your foot is on the stair
Descending toward me. Pushing back the chair,
I put my cup and paper down and stand
To watch you pack. Drive carefully out there;
The roads are full of maniacs. And you
Return the compliment, reminding me
that my commute, too, isn't innocent
of fiends behind the wheel. Your car backs slowly,
Turns at the driveway's end, then cruises on
Out of my line of sight. The summer street
Is still asleep and hardly notices.

In the ten years and more since we joined forces,
This cryptic rite of parting has grown up,
Meaning more than it says, like a secret agent
Dropping his message in among the roots
Of an aggressively ordinary tree
Tricked out in flowers to charm a summer street.
No counteragents will remotely guess
The scandalous exchanges going on
As they lose track, struggling to concentrate:
A cryptic rite better than whispering—
Though whispering, dear person, has its uses.

HOSPICE

“J.S. Bach was a shikker too, didn’t you know that?
Living inside his marinated mind.” The visitor
Leaned forward in his chair toward the shrunken head
On the pillow. “I always think of pain as filth.
Contamination of the spirit seeping
Into the soul through a tear in the inner tube
You stupid American. You never answer me.
Why don’t you tell me I’m full of shit at least,
Just for the practice, just in case
You’re back in the morning and I’ve taken a walk?”
The sister came in with soup and fluffed his pillow.
“Come to think of it, expect me in the morning.
I’m fixated on this merry-go-round like a fucking book.
Always wanting to be there if something important
Falls off me and hits the floor. Not like that lawyer
A million years ago. I like to be surprised.
Where are you off to, kid? Come back tomorrow.”
The visitor paused at the window in the stygian corridor
And caught the spring day shimmering yellow and green
Through a universe of possibilities
And strode into the afternoon checking his watch.