

New Orleans Winter

1

Mississippi,
I bring greetings
from the old gods:
from the cold voodoo
of the north,
this torch-song

River, your old dukedom
simmers in chemical haze

Crosses of black
fire shimmy
under the sign
of the fish

Greetings to you,
seething gumbo!

2

Rose at my ear, I fall
through a dream of cripples,
moral acrobats crawling
alleys of dead slave history

Jazz-dazed, I sink to my thighs
in hot sauce, dark cornet riffs
pulsing brass and jasmine,
raw oyster bars and bead-ghosts
on maimed firework horses

City, you open my mouth
and say *Drink! Here*
is my heart! Here
the best vein! and I
put my lips to the throat
that gleams in copper darkness,

my tongue on the salty skin,
the sweet milky coffee
of the breasts, the bittersweet pulp
laid open

3

Even in this cold, you are hot
glow, fat salamander colors:
nipple-tassel purple, DeChirico
orange and red:

a caravan of drag queens in ball
gowns, sequinned limousines,
white beard of the horn man,
the sure-cure of gin

Even in this cold, you grin
Drink this! you say, *Drink*
till you gasp awake!

4

If the new order comes, here
is where it will enter:
this city of cool women and hot
jazz, food for the fire gods:
a jalopeña pepper
that will unpetal
in Jackson Square
and swallow Baton Rouge
with its sticky sepals:

a jumbalaya garden teeming
with booze and sex and bad
politics

5

River,
you breathe on my neck
your last mouthful of catfish

Charles Fishman