

Elegy for the Residents of the Niagara Apartments

KEN MEISEL

I

Because there are stories too disturbing to retell
I have to first talk about the field of yellow flowers

Growing like orphans in the wild, tangles of grass
Outside of the Niagara Apartments on 3rd Avenue.

And I have to tell about Fortune Records at 3942
3rd Avenue, just north of Seldon, and the day I went

In there, panting on a run downtown, and I saw the old
Record bins full to the edges with old, hard to get vinyl.

There was Nolan Strong and the Fabulous Diablos
Sitting up on the wall, I think it was 'Mind over Matter,'

And there was 'Adios, My Desert Love,' too,
And Andre Williams howling out 'Bacon Fat,'

And of course there was John Lee Hooker,
His head tucked down into the sweaty darkness

Of a club scene in Paradise Valley, who knows what year,
But it must have been in the years he lived on Orleans.

Because I can't reveal your secret decrepitude
Lawrence, Don and Marilyn, Norman, Mary, Rosie,

All of you huddling around an egg white electric burner
With burnt coffee on it, in winter, I'll recall the stale liquor

On your breath, and the stench of cigarettes
And the urine in the hallway where one light bulb

Blown out, looked like an extinguished planet,
And none of you noticed what God himself missed,

Which was the thin streak of plaster breaking open
To reveal another world, darker and more sinister,

And the roach crawling like a secret blemish into it,
Which must have revealed that even roaches go to Hell.

II

All of you in the hard years went into the crack on the wall.
And that's because, when I went running past you,

And I saw you stuck like statues in the wild grass,
The wind billowing through your weary clothes,

The blue sky above, fluffed with clouds, I knew
That you were offerings, nothing more, to the larger

Code of decay, here, where just down street, at Peterboro,
A dog was bent over, brown as feces, and chewing

On something red, and I think I saw Mary there,
Her wrist always broken and in a white cast, feeding

The pigeons too, because they were her only children,
And because there were no more prayers left to say.

And because poverty is the way God transmits the code
Throughout the kingdoms of loss and ruin, into the people.

III

When they tore the Niagara Apartments down, which was
After I'd left there, I'm sure all of you were almost dead.

Poverty is the explanation of what happens to a soul
Without God, which I think Simone Weil would agree with,

And when the shovels dug out dirty dishes and silver pans,
I'm sure they found Norm's filthy converse sneakers and his TV,

And I'm sure Mary's silver walker and Rosie's key set
Were ground into weeds, and drip board pilings and bricks,

And I'm sure the last drunken quarrel between Don & Marilyn
Was echoing through the steel girders and the window moldings

As they ripped them down and they fell into dirt and concrete,
And into the walls with wiring scoring out of them like hair.

And I'm sure the story of their lives, although lonely and secretive,
Could be heard as one song, and it was the song of the yellow

Flowers blowing wildly in the spring grasses on 3rd Avenue
Between Charlotte and Peterboro, where the city workers

In their yellow construction hats were bending over in debris,
And they were collecting invisible bits of someone else's soul.