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Salts and Oils · Philip Levine

In Havana in 1948 I ate fried dog believing it was Peking duck. Later, in Tampa I bunked with an insane sailor who kept a .38 Smith and Wesson in his shorts. In the same room were twins, oilers from Toledo, who argued for hours each night whose turn it was to get breakfast and should he turn the eggs or not. On the way north I lived for three days on warm water in a DC-6 with a burned out radio on the runway at Athens, Georgia. We sang a song, “Georgia’s Big Behind,” and prayed for WWII and complete, unconditional surrender. Napping in an open field near Newport News, I chewed on grass while the shadows of September lengthened; in the distance a man hammered on the roof of a hanger and groaned how he was out of luck and vittles. Bummed a ride in from Mitchell Field and had beet borsch and white bread at 34th and 8th Avenue. I threw up in the alley behind the YMCA and slept until they turned me out. I walked the bridge to Brooklyn while the East River browned below. A mile from Ebbets Field, from all that history, I found Murray, my papa’s buddy, in his greasy truck shop, polishing replacement parts. Short, unshaven, puffed, he strutted the filthy aisles, a tiny Ghengis Khan. He sent out for soup.
and sandwiches. The world turned on barley, pickled meats, yellow mustard, kasha, rye breads. It rained in October, rained so hard I couldn’t walk and smoke, so I chewed pepsin chewing gum. The rain spoiled Armistice Day in Lancaster, Pa. The open cars overflowed, girls cried, the tubas and trombones went dumb, the floral displays shredded, the gutters clogged with petals. Afterwards had ham on buttered whole wheat bread, ham and butter for the first time on the same day in Zanesville with snow forecast, snow, high winds, closed roads, solid darkness before 5 p.m. These were not the labors of Hercules, these were not of meat or moment to anyone but me or destined for story or to learn from or to make me fit to take the hand of a toad or a toad princess or to stand in line for food stamps. One quiet morning at the end of my thirteenth year a little bird with a dark head and tattered tail feathers had come to the bedroom window and commanded me to pass through the winding miles of narrow dark corridors and passageways of my growing body the filth and glory of the palatable world. Since then I’ve been going out and coming back the way a swallow does with unerring grace and foreknowledge because all of this was prophesied in the final, unread book of the Midrash and because I have to grow up and because it pleases me.