Dreaming of Prague

Those first days, the crowds cheering
at Wenceslas Square —
Vaclav Havel rode a pedal scooter through the Castle.
Pinter came to dinner. The Dalai Lama.
Even the Rolling Stones.

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When I go to California
I take along some easy reading:
Kafka’s Metamorphosis
The Unbearable Lightness of Being by Kundera

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Havel is a small man, a shy man,
with tiny hands—who speaks to the floor
or to your shoulder.
How did he know
he would not wake up before a secret tribunal
or a firing squad?

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Rummaging through my desk drawer:
crayons, paintbrush, a box of Maalox.

I always want to be where I am not.

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Easy to be snide about a leather-jacket hero
restless for power
the way Hobbes said we all are.

But that doesn’t account for Havel’s five years in prison,
how he didn’t let them break him—
Bernardo Speaking Spanish

He’s fondling the arm of his best friend’s wife
in the Capitol Hill restaurant

as though it were a joke (not knowing
I spoke Spanish) & soon we were all awash

in something moist & swarmy
I didn’t want to know.

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Bernardo had left Salvador and the Peace Corps
just ahead of

la policía militar—something about
helping peasants reclaim the land.

I try not to think about those—
those I had to leave behind.

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It could have been a movie forty years ago
shot with real spools of film,

with themes like love & duty. As Bernardo,
Tony Franciosa, or maybe Farley Granger.

Today it would be video, a demented neo-noir
with jump cuts & smash-ups.

Bernardo played by Johnny Depp
or maybe John Travolta.
New York Skyline, 1907

after Wall Street Ferry Slip by Colin Campbell Cooper

The artist didn’t use photographs. 
He stood and painted what he saw:

a pink iridescent sky & skyscrapers rising 
behind old waterfront brownstones.

The Singer building and the Flatiron. 
Industrial smoke fading into cumulus clouds.

In the painting, the ferry boat carries a throng 
of passengers crossing the Hudson. 

Perhaps my husband’s parents, newly arrived 
from Poland, are on that ferry. 

We can almost see their faces. 
Battery on one side, Bronx on the other.
Dramatic Monologue: Joseph Brodsky

We tap dance down the highway & somewhere there’s an exit. Who made me a pharaoh? Dare I gesture or reach for a cigarette?

Shouldn’t I be on the banks of the Neva in the city built by Peter on swamps & the bones of the conscripted dead?

In Petersburg, we could gaze together at the floating egg-white sky. Perhaps drink tea or vodka with Akhmatova,

my second mother—she would say to me: Joseph, if you want to write a long poem, first you must come up with a rhythm—

When I was arrested at 23, it was for what? Decadence, modernism, failure to finish school & social parasitism.

Exiled to a snow-smothered village in Archangel. Kerosene lamp, typewriter. Shoveling manure. I did not lie

when I wrote, it was one of the best jobs I ever had. Perhaps we should go visit that old crone, Elena Bonner.

Even with a bum heart, she outlived us all. She’ll know all the news & we’ll drink vodka, then coffee. I’ll show you photographs:

my mother, my father. Then to Italy to see the porticos & colonnades. Somewhere I left behind a wife & daughter.

Joan E. Bauer