

From *The Phobia Clinic*

Midway through summer, I began to be
Afraid. At first the fear was nothing. Squirms
Of something like disgust. A vague anxiety

Each day toward sunset. Writhing, scalding worms
Of panic in the subway, choked unease
When walking down the street. Floors felt unfirm,

Sidewalks too broad, high windows caused a quease.
All autumn I felt edgy, morbid, tense,
As fear infected me like some disease,

My prickling nerves a charged electric fence,
My heart too fast, palms sweaty. Strings of shocks
Replaced each day's pedestrian events.

Come twilight I would chain my triple locks
Then stave off dark's assault with fifths of gin,
Pacing, compulsively consulting clocks

Until some cruel god let the daylight in.
Some nights I'd copy out Psalm 23
To quell the jits, drown out the inner din

But nothing stopped the dread or set me free.
Bare-knuckled terror knocked till dawn. Far worse
Were dreams, which I'd resist but fail to flee –

As nervous fliers, throttling book or purse,
Descend the endless jetway to their plane
Then strap themselves into their idling hearse.

The world or I or both seemed gone insane
As blameless objects turned to cunning traitors
And teeming visions paralyzed my brain:

The grinding, ravening jaws of escalators,
Or snapped wires, motors failing, getting trapped –
Specters that obviated elevators

And made me limp up long stairs, handicapped
By apprehension. Dreading shut-in spaces,
I shunned large stores and shops, or fled them, sapped,

Yet threaded open boulevards like mazes.
In late December I dropped job and friends
As inner darkness waxed in lunar phases

Till every day was night, all streets dead ends.
Then: Easter Eve I walked out on the Bridge
To put a final stop to fear. To cleanse

The world of *Me*. As tiny as a midge
Glued to some spider's massive, gleaming net,
I stood there shivering as in some frigid

Nor'easter. Scenery off a postcard met
My eyes as sunset gilt the great steel spires,
Our national shelf of high-prized statuettes.

Yet I saw nothing out there to admire.
I wished them gone beneath night's lowering lid,
Extinguished by apocalyptic fire.

From my panopticon, the Bridge's grid,
I studied the grim water, which to me
Seemed racing toward extinction, to be hid

In ocean, swallowed up and turned to sea.
Why. Why go on. The words rang like a shout.
Death rapped my chest like opportunity.

I climbed the rail. And then the lights went out.