

*Alfred Corn*  
Brodsky At The Caffé Dante

A Village den, not far from Morton Street,  
Where you'd hosted a party just the week  
Before, your birthday cake a replica  
Of *A Part of Speech's* jacket. Practical  
Joke? It wasn't your most recent book,  
Which blunt reviews had sort of trounced. But luck  
'S a weathervane, and that year mine, too, had  
Gone south, or sour, as I could tell you'd heard.

Strange: your large-scale forehead (the temple sported  
A windswept curl Romantically borrowed  
From Pushkin or Chateaubriand) was unlined,  
Free of the trenches that gulags make or, exile.  
Instead, it beamed a dynamic melancholy  
Over our topics – none of them dire, really.  
Ovid more vulnerable than Mandelshtam;  
What Byron felt when he saw Dante's tomb.

I asked if you linked the San Marco Lion  
To the tenement on St. Marks Place, where Auden  
Had lived for decades. Just to hear his name  
Unpacked a smile... In fact, the piece of cake  
They'd cut you showed the King of Cats' brown sugar  
Wing. Piston thrusts from that small figure,  
Were counterparts to espressos we would drink –  
Its caffeine still buzzing, I like to think.