Once

Hunry and cold, I stood in a doorway

on Delancey Street in 1946

as the rain came down. The worst part is this

is not from a bad movie. I'd read Dos Passos'

USA and thought, "Before the night ends

my life will change." A stranger would stop

to ask for my help, a single stranger

more needy than I, if such a woman

were possible. I still had cigarettes,

damp matches, and an inaccurate map

of Manhattan in my head, and the change

from the one $20 traveler's check

I'd cashed in a dairy restaurant where

the amazed owner actually proclaimed

to the busy heads, "They got Jews in Detroit!"

You can forgive the night. No one else was dumb

enough to be out. Sure, it was Easter.

Was I expecting crocus and lilac

to burst from the pavement and sweeten

the air the way they did in Michigan once

upon a time? This wouldn't be so bad

if you were only young once. Once would be fine.

You stand out in the rain once and get wet

expecting to enter fiction. You huddle

under the Williamsburg Bridge posing for Life.

You trek to the Owl Hotel to lie awake

in a room the size of a cat box and smell

the dawn as it leaks under the shade

with the damp welcome you deserve. Just the once

you earn your doctorate in mismanagement.

So I was eighteen, once, fifty years ago,

a kid from a small town with big ideas.

Gatsby said if Detroit is your idea

of a small town you need another idea,

and I needed several. I retied my shoes, washed

my face, brushed my teeth with a furry tongue,

counted out my $11.80

on the broken bed, and decided the time

had come to mature. How else can I explain

voting for Adlai Stevenson once and once

again, planting a lemon tree in hard pan,

loaning my Charlie Parker 78s

to an out-of-work actor, eating pork loin

barbecued on Passover, tangoing

perfectly without music even with you?