

*Last Supper. Venetian. Sixteenth Century*

I

As soon as I had finished my *Last Supper*,  
thirteen yards by five and a half,  
a monstrous job, but rather well paid,  
the usual questions came up:  
What exactly do these foreigners mean  
with their halberds? They are dressed  
like Germans, or like heretics.  
Do you think it is normal  
to depict Saint Luke  
with a toothpick in his hand?  
Who put the idea into your head  
to sit Moors, drunkards and clowns  
at Our Lord's table?  
Do we have to put up with a dog  
sniffing around, a dwarf, a parrot  
and a Mameluke bleeding from his nose?  
My Lords, I said, all this  
I have invented for my own pleasure.  
But the seven judges of the Holy Inquisition,  
in a flutter of red silk robes,  
murmured: That's as may be.

II

Oh, I have done better than that  
in other paintings,  
but nobody else can do a sky  
the color of this one;  
and I am pleased by these cooks  
with their long butcher's knives,  
by these men clad in slashed hoods  
trimmed with fur, in aigrets

adorned with heron feathers, in diadems  
and pearl-studded turbans;  
not to mention the muffled people  
who have mounted the most distant rooftops  
of my alabaster-faced palaces,  
leaning over the parapets at a dizzy height.  
What they are looking for  
I cannot tell. But they do not even glance  
at you, or at the saints.

### III

I have told you again and again:  
There is no art without pleasure.  
This is true even of the endless Crucifixions,  
Deluges and Massacres of the Innocent  
which you ask me to execute —  
I cannot imagine why.  
So when the sighs of the critics,  
the subtleties of the inquisitors  
and the probings of the scribes  
became too much for me,  
I rechristened my *Last Supper*  
and decided to call it  
*A Dinner at Mr Levi's*.

### IV

Just wait and see who will have the last word.  
Take my *Saint Anne, the Virgin and Child*, for example.  
Not a very amusing subject.  
But underneath the throne,  
on the checkered marble floor  
done in sand-rose, black and malachite,  
I put, as a redeeming grace,  
a soup turtle with rolling eyes,  
elegant feet and a shield  
of translucent tortoiseshell.

A marvelous idea.

Like an enormous, perfectly arched shell comb,  
the color of topaz, she glowed in the sun.

V

But as soon as I saw her crawling,  
I thought of my enemies.

The gallerists babbling,  
the academicians hissing,  
and the belching of the prigs.

I took up my brush  
and I buried my creature  
beneath a few carefully done tiles  
of black, green and rose-colored marble  
before the parasites had a chance  
to explain her to me.

*Saint Anne* is not my most famous work,  
but perhaps my best.

No one except me knows why.