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Essay on Rime

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Gerald Stern

Essay On Rime

God knows those apes my father's relatives
born in the Ukraine and raised on white cheese and herring
will live till their hundred and twenties so I will be
careful when I tell my Ukrainian tales
and check all the cities from Novgorod to Dallas.

God knows, God knows, they lived on a small farm
owned by ethnic Germans and cut trees down
and studied for only a month a year in the autumn
and one in the spring. God the trumpeter knows
that one of them owned a stogie factory in Pittsburgh

and one was a dentist in Michigan and one
had a perfume shop on the rue Madelaine and drove
a Buick. Because of his luck and where he was sent
to sojourn during the first days of the war
one of them ended up in Florida filling

prescriptions and later cashing checks. I
who have the brains in the family, I ended up
on a wooden porch arguing with a swallow
and wrestling with a bluebell. My plan is now
to live in three places, maybe divide my books

and maybe divide my time. One of my houses
will have to be near Turkey since that is the way
to get back to the Crimea and the Sea of
Azov; and I have chosen Samos only
because Pythagoras rebuked the petty tyrant

Polycrates there by the waters of Ambelos;
and I could have a cat who eats his catch
behind the wet rocks and shakes his rear leg and read
my American subscriptions and rant as I did
when I was twenty, even if I was alone, though

I would be, I think, surrounded as always
and listen to the sound of waves assembling
and count the intervals. Even the druggist,
even the perfumist, would understand that,
wouldn't they, my rich cousins who burned, the one

at Nice, the other at Coral Gables. I who
sat and slept for hours and knew white crests
and the brown valleys and what they meant, and I
who loved the sun just as they did and burned
from the same fire I sang with my broken fingers.