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But We Shall All Be Changed

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BUT WE SHALL ALL BE CHANGED

The minor devil wears a leather bomber
and overshoes to push through night-slush and sleet
to the house of two retiring angels assigned
to distract him in Cleveland. He's handed a plate
of delicacies, like local angels; bookcase speakers
hymn them in with piano jazz; the white-haired hosts grind
coffee beans; angels talk poetry beneath a watercolor
of a green cantaloupe sunning apples on a brass tray.
When the host painted it, his wife and New York City
were young, he tells the minor devil, were more
devilish. The host's green fruit will never decay.
The devil envies this hospitality
that beams, through the snow, a homing signal to all
the locals practicing short-winged flights across
Cleveland. His own flight pattern is a free-fall
sideways across America, homeless
as a cloud. But the same clear signal homed in
on him. Here he stands, almost human for one
night in this house where the difference between
what he is and what he could be closes in,
angel after homely angel. This fresh drink
placed in his hand, this seeking of his opinion—
hell blows away outside, and whom can he thank?
The hosts insist on thanking him for flying
into Cleveland; for permitting them to take him,
dressed like a nice heretic, to the Brahms Requiem.
Blessed be the dead, the chorus was singing
in Severance Hall. I thought I'd have to die
to be done with this devil pose, he tells his protector:
I didn't guess I could lose it simply by
flying to Cleveland. Have another deviled egg,
the hostess says. He does. He wants to kiss her
for feeding him like an angel among
snow clouds; her bright cloud hair makes his gray young.

He could thank them all for ignoring his big
ingrown horns, his slightly sulfurous breath.
Narcissism is hell, however minor
its mirror, however invisible. In this air
of tiny crystal wings cleaving to Cleveland
his heart is squeezed as though by a gold band
that marries him to a strange idea that death
and hell can simply be canceled anywhere
he pronounces the unlikely mantra *Cleveland*.
The painted cantaloupe shines like a green sun
while angels bid him goodnight and step, one
by one, into the knife wind. *Just one minute more*,
he says. *Cleveland*, he says, and opens the door.