

two begun with nothing  
working up to this?  
America, America,  
God had shed his grace.

Naked in the cabana  
to put them in the mood  
they drank vodka stingers  
and made what love they could

then reeled into the hot tub,  
too numb to feel regret,  
and almost joyfully  
boiled themselves to death.

— Harold Witt

Orinda CA

#### SOMETIMES A SUDDEN MADNESS

Many have gotten the thing to work,  
including Van Gogh  
who got it to work more beautifully than most,  
although the irony  
of his all too human life  
was that he doubted he had  
when he walked into Dr. Gachet's garden  
& blew the sun out of his head;  
sometimes doubt flares up  
like the sudden madness  
of a blustering crow in the noonday glare,  
then it's good to remember  
the placid heron  
that wades the beach just before dusk,  
its legs glowing like two radioactive rods  
as it stalks its dinner.

#### DEJA VU

We haven't met before,  
so I suggest we continue the barroom talk  
with a getting-to-know-you literary game:

It goes like this, I say. For instance,  
what story would you read on a stormy night?

I get it, she says. I like to read W. W. Jacobs'  
The Monkey's Paw on stormy nights.

Oh? I say.

When I go to the seashore in the fall  
I read Thomas Mann's Death in Venice.

Um, I say.

In Paris I read Fitzgerald's Babylon Revisited.

Unhuh, I say.

When I visit friends at their country house,  
it's Saki's The Open Window ...

I call the bartender & order another round,  
having this weird feeling  
that maybe we have met before.

#### THE SECRET LIFE OF WALTER MIDDLEING

She replies to a mid-life query  
with what she considers wifely support:

"I think the gray in your beard," she says,  
"makes you look more sexy as a poet."

I refrain from telling her a secret:  
that for as long as I can remember  
sex has been my chief interest  
with poetry taking second;

so, although her reply to my question was nice,  
just more sexy would have been nicer.

#### THE DECLINE OF A WEST

Early on I was enthralled by Ivanhoe  
& the other novels of Sir Walter Scott,  
the stories & poetry of R. L. Stevenson & Poe,  
the pictorial magic  
of illustrators like Arthur Rackham  
& the joys of playing baseball fairly well,

then upon reaching manhood I became  
enamored of Hemingway,  
F. Scott, Hammett's The Maltese Falcon,  
James M. Cain, Camus, Céline,  
Dostoevsky, The Ring of the Nibelungs,  
Böcklin's paintings,