

Tectonics of the Dessert Plate

I have lifelong friend who is, at fifty-nine--
Hope springs eternal--grimly social climbing still.
"You've gotten where you're going to get," I tell him. Where
Can still be vague: a Cincinnati upper crust
By now, but on its sticky underside. A week
Before my visit comes the briefing. "Rent a tux,"
He telephones. "It's black tie at the Loridans".
As frequent visitor I am an ornament
Or an embarrassment, depending on which rung
He's trying for. The Loridans cannot be much.
"And if you have long underwear bring *it* along.
They keep the house at fifty." As the climb works out,
The one tuxedo in the dining room is his.
The Loridans assume, correctly, we aren't much.
Our host has on a suit and sweater, as have I.
Lap robes would be appropriate. The granite house
Has twenty-seven rooms, each colder than the next,
None colder than our food. "We've thought about gas logs,"
Says Mrs. Loridans, "but we so love the fire."
Electric warming trays are not some counterfeit
Of chafing dishes, I might add, but hold my peace.
Madame turns vicious. "My, how formal we've become."
"The University Yearbook. I'm O.D.K.
Adviser. We posed for the photographs today."
"And then he had to meet my plane," I volunteer.
So deft a lie impresses. It deserves support.
Two caterers who cannot know qualude from quail
Cut up a baked Alaska. Plate tectonics shift.
The ice-cream core has melted; its meringue is cold.

...

My Fourth of July briefing is elaborate.
"You'll like the two Crevecoeurs. Baudoin if not La Mere.
It's her I got that '67 Fleetwood from."
Upgrading golden oldies is a form of climb.
"Eve almost counts as Taft. Jilted the Senator.
Work on your liver. They both drink a lot." They look
Echt Deutsch. French names in Cincinnati, I conclude,
Are like White servants on the Rand: one-up in chic.
I need not say that the famille Crevecoeur outdoes.
They have an old Black butler shakier than they,
A last survivor of the Underground Railroad,
Who is introduced, I swear, as "Uber Oberrein."
I need a hearing aid. At Christmas I find out,
When the Adviser tries to hire him for an Ho
D.K. festivity, Herr Uber's name in fact
Is Heber O'Brien. All the food he trolleys out,
At seven minutes after midnight, looks superb,

But after six Manhattans, we forget to eat.
Baudoin, he says himself, must drink to ease the pain
Of his arthritis. Mother simply drinks. Or drinks
Because her four-door Cadillac went for a steal.
They have a
riverfront apartment, double-glazed,
But in the blazing July heat, greenhouse effect,
And rendered awkward in the sunken living room
By countersunk Jacuzzis. For the pain also,
I have no doubt. In one of them champagne is chilling.

...

"The Mengeldorffs are lovely people."

"Let me guess.

Alsace-Lorraine."

"Shut up. I work with Muniment

On this year's Maifest Board."

"I'll rent a full dress suit."

"There's something else you ought to know. They have this child
Who's terribly retarded. Classic Downs Syndrome."

"Oh dear. Is white tie adequate? I mean...to meet
Society's most fashionable mongoloid..."

"He has his own staff, Bitch. His own part of the house."

...

That may well be; mainstreaming, though, is more "in" still.

So, in a handsome Spanish house--it seems displaced
From Montecito or Pacific Palisades--

Next to his plastic surgeon, who now makes a guest,
And opposite his staff, whose name is Rosa Mae,

I brave a musicale with Cincinnati's--be

Assured--most eye-corrected mongoloid. As ice

And melon balls are passed about, he does not drool,

Although his keeper does. She has no upper teeth.

He also wields a spoon more gracefully than she.

Such is the expertise of private schools nearby.

His father, Viktor Mengeldorff, at one of two

Steinways, below a portrait and an autograph

Of Richard Strauss, the which I covet, for four hands

Does Mendelssohn. The other hands are Monument's

If she is anyone it is Mama Dionne.

Women who bring forth monsters tend to look alike,

However differing in skill their corseteers.

Her husband has, as we should delicately say,

Re-stated his financial picture. He is broke.

"Tonight's a sort of yard sale," he confesses. "Who'll

Make me an offer on one Steinway and a Strauss?"

I would, except that from my rear a kick arrives,

To say the joke is absit omen. Who can read

Downfall more surely than a social Alpinist?
I am myself quite at my peak of form. I *am*
Outfitted in a full dress suit, and not from some prom
Supplier, either. It is borrowed from the high
Man on the totem pole, the Maypole, if you like.,
Whose capabilities I underestimate:
May Festival from O.D.K. is quantum leap.
The upgrade in my formal wear is not my choice.
At lunch the Crevecoeur butler shook a lemon mousse
Upon my only suit. Now, deal with Mengendorff.
"I'll buy the *house*," I joke, " and move it stone by stone
To Carmel Highlands. You must code the pieces, though."
I have upon my left hand Madeleine Loridans.
"That's not a proper chimney," she is whispering.
"It's just a flue encased. It doesn't even smoke."