

JOHN HOLLANDER

Prosaic Translation

Odysseus made a good voyage, out to all that stuff then back—
Through all that other stuff—to the hearth and home
And doggy and her you could all call *nostos*.
Going on the *Argo*, too, was also good—a good trip
To have come back from, having gained a lot of valuable experience,
If you know what I mean, to live out your life among your
people,
Those still alive living themselves among those still remembered . . .
.

“I don’t know if or when, / I’ll ever see again . . .

Dum de dah dah doo dee—da dah dum dum”—well, I really don’t:
you never know

What can happen, and at any moment—see again those thin
chimney stacks

With slowly turning fans atop them, poking up above
Manhattan rooftops

Where the high wooden water tanks catch the setting sun from
across the river.

And when will or may I see the scraggly little park
Behind the Museum of Natural History (the “big,” or Central, park
Lying a block or so eastward)? Little and filled with little—
Privet, some small sycamores and ginkgoes, bit of forsythia—
It was my flourishing Garden of Improvisations, so close
To home and containing me closely as no grandly planted place
On the pages of the largest books ever could
(Yet—and whether alas, or not—perhaps would).

The apartment my parents’ none too copious
But steady salaries shored up, and the glimpse,
As I approached it on winter evenings, of its dark red brick façade
Patched with reassuring rectangles of light—I loved it more
Than all the later-known, sanctioned elegances
Of palaces and churches, great, merely grand or even gross,

I would come to fancy that I felt “at home” in the contemplation of.
And the small hexagonal cells of white tile on the bathroom floor—

*Heureux qui, comme Ulysse, a fait un beau voyage
Ou comme celui qui conquiert la toison . . .*

—Joachim Du Bellay

They were more fascinating than Ravenna’s tesserae
Of gold and blue, and still are because I can now see them
Again through the old mind’s widely-traveled eyes, yes.

Better than the long-ennobled Tiber, the recent Hudson, “lordly”
Only in trope; better than the lovely palace at Urbino
That apartment on 79th Street when I was still small enough
To be happy in its scaled-up capaciousness;
Better than Pisgah, Monadnock, Arlo-Hill, Mont Sainte-Victoire,
I love
The yet-unbuilt-upon Palisades glimpsed after I had awakened
Each morning when the floods of night receded from my local
Ararat.

And as for atmosphere, rather than any change of climate
Of the sort that doctors used to recommend
Involving wide sea or high mountain air, I’d want to breathe again
Scents of the nobly varied realms of narrow shops—
Butcher, baker, greengrocer, fish market, drugstore-with-soda-
fountain, drycleaners—
On Amsterdam and Broadway, which my childhood inhaled to
its wonder and delight.