

In the Old City

The streets are fierce with vendor's carts —
ices the color of anti-freeze, grey meat
on a stick. Everything's for sale: a green monkey

baring its fangs, stall after stall of knock-off
t-shirts, Mickey demented and leering.
You buy a pink toy broom, sweep a tiny spot

of sidewalk, the back of my hand (proletarian
toy, toy of low expectations). Quito sprawls
around us, jade bowl of smog. In each new church

the crucifixes grow more cruel, each Christ
more fervently pierced, gore-streaked, ecstatic —
gruesome work, devotion — we stop for coffee,

strong and sweet, black tincture thinned
with boiling water. A rooster strips its gears.
All the churchbells ring at once, their long call

to the saints ascending, a kind of joy, blurred
into the traffic's bellow and honk. White-wigged,
dreaming of fire, Mt. Pichincha throbs at the end

of every street. It's time to sell what we can sell,
crawl on torn knees to the steps of *La Merced*.
Time to forget this world, this sun, gold-

leafed behind our heads, almost a benediction . . .