

Homeland Security

My advice to anybody who looks like an Arab these days is,
when you're in a post office or jogging around the reservoir,
never stop and jot down any notes,
even if it's a great idea for a poem.

And for God's sake don't snap any photos at the airport,
even of your cousins arriving from St. Louis.
God forbid you should draw a map of the subway for them,
showing the route between their hotel and your house!

And if a new "friend"—the guy on the next bar stool, say—
starts suggesting pranks
like blowing up tunnels or poisoning the water supply
or, God forbid, assassinating anyone
and how it might be done by you and a few pals,
just keep saying what's fun about that,
even as a reality game, and you're really only
interested in poetry about nightingales.

And if this "friend" brings up the subject of the Palestinians,
for whom you might reasonably have some sympathy,
and asks how about joining up to help in resisting the occupation,
or aren't you furious about the takeover of Iraq,
and don't you want revenge, he can get some weapons—
just choke back your rage and go vague,
become a dumb American and say Iraq? Where's that?

Don't be surprised if photographs and taped conversations—
did you think that button on your "friend's" shirt
was just a button?—are used against you
as evidence that you're a terrorist mastermind
plotting to overthrow the government
and install an Islamic Republic here—

even if he's the one who laid out the plot
and all you did was cross your eyes.

So even if you'd love to get rid of the criminals
in the government of this, your adopted country,
as bad as the ones you escaped from
who jailed your father for years without trial,
just cultivate a stupid grin and play dumb.

And when they lead you away in handcuffs
don't bother protesting your innocence and calling for a lawyer.
You can't have one—and you're guilty.