“You’re gonna need this someday at a cocktail party!”

crowed Mrs. Morganstern, tiny lady with a helmet
of dyed red hair scribbling Africa facts
across the blackboard, going toe to toe with teens
contesting the likelihood of her daily claim—
though I, for one, was more apt to dream
of a future rife with cocktail parties,
porcelain-skinned women in feathery gowns
wafting through high-ceilinged rooms
full of artists, scholars, film moguls
and me: shoulder to shoulder
with my disadvantaged peers, who lacked the benefit
of 8th grade history with Mrs. Morganstern.

Though now, well into middle age, I would
like to ask Mrs. Morganstern: where the hell
was the cocktail party? Did the world turn
a corner between her generation and mine,
placing a moratorium on the highball,
swapping it for the kegger, quarts of Miller
in the woods behind Main Street, upside-down
kamikazes on frat-party couches, the table
at the back wall of the literary reading
where tight-assed professors spewed classical
allusions to girls with daddy issues while sucking
down cups of boxed wine? And while I didn’t
mind clinking those little mugs
at sawdust-strewn McSorley’s with the Department Chair
who kept saying, “I love my wife” more
and more the drunker he got,
it wasn’t Mrs. Morganstern’s cocktail party,
the one where I meet my wife, all because
the right moment arose for me to deliver
a morsel I’ve been carrying since 8th grade:
“Funny thing: it was actually under the leadership of Jomo Kenyatta
that Kenya was able to shrug off colonialism
while remaining stable and prosperous”—
whereupon a waifish beauty named Candace or Muriel—
no: Giselle!—pulls back her hair, leans in
and whispers, “Who are you?”

And what of Mrs. Morganstern, who I think of every
time I hear the song “Goodnight, Irene”—
for that was her first name: Irene. 13-year-olds
aren’t supposed to know that, but we did
because Mrs. Morganstern didn’t care about
such things, compared to how she loved history.
And she loved us—otherwise, she wouldn’t have
attended the junior high prom each spring,
and she wouldn’t have done The Bump
with Stuart Vargas, the biggest trouble-maker in the class, squatting lower and lower
and knocking asses, as that dance is done.