Brooklyn, 1939. Sam Clayman wakes up from dreams of masked men and devious villains to find a stranger in his room. This stranger happens to be his cousin Joseph Kavalier, a refugee from Nazi occupied Prague. Sam’s mother badgers Sam to get his cousin a job at Empire Novelty, a toy company where Sam works as an illustrator. The unspoken gravity of the situation hangs in the air: Joe needs to make enough money to send for his family in Prague as the city becomes less hospitable to Jews every day.

After Sam falls asleep, Joe sits down at Sam’s desk to work on building a portfolio of art to show Sam and the bosses at Empire Novelty the next day.

JOE

A portfolio.

WHAT DO AMERICANS LIKE?
BASEBALL?
YANKEES?
GRETA GARBO?
WHAT DO AMERICANS LIKE?
FOOTBALL?
HOT DOGS?
THIS I DON’T KNOW...

DRAW A BOY ON HIS WAY TO BROOKLYN:
DRAW THREE TRAINS,
SIX BUSSIES,
A CAR THROUGH JAPAN;
DRAW THE ROADS,
DRAW THE MOUNTAINS,
DRAW THE TOWNS.
MIX PAPER AND INK...
DON’T STOP TO THINK:
DRAW WHAT YOU KNOW.
JOE (cont.)
DRAW THE BOAT IN ALL IT’S DETAIL
DRAW THE DECK,
YOUR CABIN,
THE MEN PLAYING CARDS;
DRAW THE FOOD,
DRAW THE WAITING,
DRAW THE WAVES.
COMBINE WHITE AND BLACK
IT ALL RUSHES BACK.
YOU DRAW WHAT YOU KNOW.

ALL YOU KNOW IS WORLDS AWAY
YOU CAN’T GO BACK AND YET
IF YOU PUT IT ON THE PAGE
PERHAPS YOU WON’T FORGET

DRAW A MAP OF YOUR HOME, YOUR CITY
CAPTURE PRAGUE ON A WARM SUMMER’S NIGHT
DRAW THE STREETS
DRAW THE RIVER
BUSTLING SQUARES
FLOWING BEER
KEEP BREATHING AND THEN
LET IT FLOW THROUGH THE PEN:
I DRAW WHAT I KNOW

TAKE A BREATH AND DRAW YOUR FAMILY
THINK OF MA
YOUR FATHER
YOUR BROTHER AND THEN
DRAW THEIR LIVES
EVERY DETAIL
MOTHER’S LAUGH
FATHER’S PIPE
AS I DRAW THEM I SWEAR
IT FEELS LIKE THEY’RE THERE...

(Thomas appears.)

THOMAS
I wish I could go with you.
JOE
I know, so do I. But you’ll be with me soon enough.

THOMAS
Do you promise?

JOE
I will make sure of it. I won’t rest until I’m meeting your ship in the harbor of New York City.

THOMAS
On that island they have, with the Statue of Liberation.

JOE
I promise.

THOMAS
Swear by Harry Houdini.

JOE
I swear by Harry Houdini that ten thousand chains and locks won’t keep you from me, little brother.

ALL YOU KNOW IS WORLDS AWAY
YOU CAN’T GO BACK AND YET
IF YOU PUT IT ON THE PAGE
PERHAPS YOU WON’T FORGET
DRAW THE WORLD YOU WISH TO SEE
IT’S CHILDISH BUT YOU FEEL
IF YOU PUT IT ON THE PAGE
PERHAPS YOU MAKE IT REAL

MOVE YOUR PEN ACROSS THE PAPER
MEASURE LINES,
PERSPECTIVES,
ADD SHADOWS FOR WEIGHT
WITH EACH STROKE
YOU REMEMBER
WITH EACH STROKE
YOU ARE HOME
WHATEVER I THINK
I CAN MAKE OUT OF INK
JOE (cont.)
GRAB A PEN, OUT IT WILL FLOW.
WHAT ELSE CAN I DO?
THAT I DON’T KNOW.

(After a moment, Joe returns to the desk, sketching and sketching.)

DRAW WHAT YOUR COUSIN WILL LIKE
BASEBALL,
YANKEES,
GRETA GARBO...

(Joe continues drawing into the night.)