A MIND LIKE THIS

A Thesis

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by

Susan Blackwell Ramsey

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Cornelius Eady, Director

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Which of you is literary, and which one likes to dance?

Nicholas Delbanco

What Remains
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AND A THIRD OF EVERYTHING THAT’S LEFT
Pickled Heads: St. Petersburg

For years they floated in adjacent jars,
   two heads on a dusty storage shelf,
abandoned in a back room of the palace:
    Mary Hamilton and Charles Mons.

We want to make things last. Salt, sugar, sun
will work, and tannin from chestnut bark, and brains
spread on the skins that toted them, and sometimes
words. But new two hundred years ago—

these “spirits of wine.” (Fermenting’s nature, but
distilling’s art.) Not all steam is water,
just as not all passion’s love. Boil wine,
catch what evaporates, trap that alcohol

and it preserves whatever you drop in,
   the head of your wife’s lover, for example—
Peter ordered his queen to display it on her mantle—
or your mistress, killed for infanticide.

They say Great Peter kissed the dead head’s lips.
The bodies sinned, the heads were saved. Don’t be
distracted by stories of Joaquin Murrieta
   glaring in a jar in California.

Though he was gunned down by someone named Love,
his problems were political, not erotic.
He really should remind you of Evita,
   beautif’ully embalmed, better than Lenin,

then passed around, hot political potato,
hidden in attics, propped like a doll behind
a movie screen for weeks, deaths unfurling behind her
   like a red scarf from Isadora’s car.

And even if Jeremy Bentham’s head was found
   once in a luggage locker in Aberdeen,
   once in the front quadrangle being used
as a football by medical students, he died

a natural death and landed in that cabinet,
stuffed, propped, dressed through his own will,
wax head on his shoulders, catastrophe in the drawer,
still convinced Utility was his goal.

The uses the dead are put to by the living.
Peter saved one for hatred, one for love,
and they outlasted hatred, love and Peter
to become flip sides of Death’s two-headed coin.

Heads win. Maybe the story
isn’t the heads but Peter, unstoppable
monster consuming youth, a Minotaur
trapped in the labyrinth he built himself.

Finally Catherine freed them. After decades
she found them, observed how well their youth and beauty
were preserved, and had them buried, though no one says
whether bottled or free to stop being beautiful.
Peripheral: Emerson, 1847

His life seemed full of isolated details, some interesting enough,
but without connections one to another or to a larger coherence.
Robert Richardson, Emerson: The Mind on Fire

Bill says I’m right, he learned it in the service --
night vision is different. You have to train your eyes
to one side of what you want to see. It works
for faint stars, too. Orion’s testicles

blink on, blink off, like the neon martini
over some rundown bar. Let focus go,

and the secrets moving through the long blades of grass
change from point to wave, to pattern, plot.

To draw a chair, draw the spaces between the legs.
Paint only shadows -- your brain supplies the face.

The bodies were gone by the time they found Pompeii,
but ash shaped casts around what once was there,
as peripheral people may define the shape
of someone otherwise too big to see.

(Andrew Wyeth painted his father as a hill.)
So don’t focus on this house where turnpike

meets Great Country Road. Try glancing east
where gawkers watch Alcott hammer that summerhouse

Emerson’s kindness commissioned -- nine posts, not from need
but for the Muses, and nearly more nails than lumber,
or focus on this coach delivering
Aunt Mary Moody Emerson, four foot two,
traveling with her coffin, wearing her shroud,
whose letters shaped his brain. Or come out back

and climb up on this branch with me. Right now
apples are Emerson’s passion. We’ll peer between
leaves the way pinhole and paper
let you watch eclipse and not go blind.

His boy’s been buried these five years. In March
he pruned every tree to let in light -- the rule
is to trim everything that grows up or in
and a third of everything that’s left.

Lace is by nature peripheral but may
be saved, passed on, after the garment frays.

The unicorn tapestries were used as tarps
in fields and orchards for a hundred years.

Tapestry weavers must work from the back.
Lace is a regular pattern of absences.
Knitting Lace

Like any widow, any amputee,
lace is defined by absence,
by what is missing, lack.
There is no such thing
as solid lace.

It’s possible

to churn out lace by rote,
each row executed, crossed off, mere
mechanics of fingers, thread.
But lace craves

full engagement, the moment
that you grasp
its particular logic, spot
the error in the row below, know
how to fix it,

not ripping out whole rows,
but dropping down
one stitch, amending, climbing back up
to go on waltzing, stitch, space, stitch,
counting with the body, not the brain.

Lace makes you concentrate.
No coasting, cruising,
mind in neutral, fingers ticking off
a rosary of repetitious stitches.
Lace takes

your best attention,
the park bench in your brain
where math and language hunch
over a chessboard, leaves blowing
past their ankles.
Gaudeamus, Full Band Version

Eric Clapton’s Layla is a mess
I love, wailing guitar lament refuted
by rich piano, the guitars relenting
in the end but no real resolution,
just a dwindling, a musical entropy,
like a toddler slipping from tantrum into sleep.

I’m a musical moron who would rather play
Bach in the background while I brush my teeth
than sit with a symphony orchestra, missing my knitting.
So why do I tear up every time I hear
that high note in the final line of Brahms’s
“Academic Festival Overture?”

It is, after all, a glorious joke,
response to being told a thank-you postcard
in exchange for an honorary doctorate
is insufficient. Very well, Brahms responded,
and sent that ponderous title to them, scored
for the biggest orchestra of his life.

Size matters. I downloaded a favorite song
and thought I’d been wrong to like it, felt memory
had gilded it, or that age had drained the pleasure,
like ears or tongue dulling until my son suggested
“You’ve got ‘acoustic.’ Try the ‘Full Band Version.’”
Brahms himself never went to college, but

when he was twenty he spent one glorious summer
living in Grottingen with a friend who did.
Everything looks better from outside,
golden in lamplight. Brahms was no academic,
but he remembered those passionate bullshit sessions,
the argument, the laughter and the songs.

Especially the songs. So he chose a format,
formal, intricate, interweaving themes
and variations -- but those themes are drinking songs.
The faculty begins to twitch and fidget.
The kids grin, then begin to sing along.
Young Clapton began with climax and worked backward;

Brahms, being old, knew how to postpone pleasure
until, strings running up and down like squirrels, permitting himself cymbals, the brass grabs you by the hair and slams you on your feet singing, whether you know the words or not, “Gaudeamus Iqatur,” “While we are young.

let us rejoice.” Let the faculty fume, their egos cheated of glory. Let Clapton pluck an unplugged tribute to his own lost youth. Old Brahms blows out the back wall with the joy of being young, then tops it with that note, that smile concealed behind the big gray beard.
To the Boy on Stilts on Bronson Boulevard

It’s downhill, the speed limit’s twenty five
under the tunnel of trees where this road twists
beneath the distant windows of the wealthy
and I’ve already been ticketed twice through here,
so I was trying to watch the speedometer,
the curves, to monitor in my rearview mirror
the impatient procession riding my tail,
while scanning footbridge and bushes for radar guns,
tapping my brakes, resisting gravity’s goad,
when I glimpsed you stumping up the sidewalk
in that gold you get when the light is level
and bouncing off leaves at the end of the day,
arms twined back around upright chunks of lumber,
eyes down, and as I shot into the open,
speed limit rising, an extra lane’s ease, I wondered
what you were doing on that lonesome stretch
so far from likely houses and from help,
where one bad step would land you flat in traffic,
wished you a long-haired girl as audience
and considered calling to ask a rabbi
whether, in the plethora of blessings
the Talmud specifies for all occasions
there is any blessing bright enough
for the young who choose to walk uphill on stilts.
Children in Church

are the white the artist adds,
the black,
to paint, producing tints and shades, amending
an otherwise too-pure pigment,
one without nuance or grit.

They are at once
new-minted spirit, joy, small silver minnows
and absolute body, appetite, distraction,
the laundry after the rapture,
what you're given
to up the ante when it gets too easy.

Monastics should
import small children once a week the way
batters swing three bats,
runners wear ankle weights,
oysters inhale the catalyst of pearls.
Outside Interests

The scarlet birdhouse you gave me for Christmas was, that first year, rewarded by a wren. We braced binoculars, charmed to watch them wrestle long straws sideways through that narrow doorway, wondered how they accomplished anything, so frequent was that bubbling, sudden song.

The next year a rose breasted grosbeak moved into the kitchen cupboard, behind the cans of lima beans. Dinner was difficult, but the sense of privilege compensated.

When the nesting pair of sandhill cranes chose the living room sofa, we gave ground, sitting on the bed to read the paper, to eat our take-out, the barred owl on the bookshelf asking "Who cooks for you?" New interests drive out old. The cats left long ago. Goldfinches scallop through the living room, a lemon arpeggio in one window, out the other. We tell ourselves the Canada geese are good graphic design, if not quite furniture.

Listening for the field sparrow's decelerating ping-pong ball, we turned the phone off. We don't miss friends unwilling to debate the relative thrills of hosting a white-throated versus a chipping sparrow. They left some time ago, murmuring about our loss of habitat, their huge pale eyes turned inward.
Mount St. Helen's, May 19, 1980

"Vancouver! Vancouver! This is it!"

David Johnson, volcanologist

i.
"They never found the body." Put five hundred atom bombs in a mountain. Detonate them sideways in what's called a lateral blast. Park your trailer on that mountainside. Be there when a Richter five point one earthquake starts to build, the landscape slips. You have five seconds. I don't think you have ten. How will you spend your time?

ii
The vocabulary of catastrophe is lovely, as if vulcanologists built their laboratories out of slabs of jewels. The words are handholds stapled to hurricanes, full of l's forcing the tongue to ululate: Plinean column, pyroclastic flow, blowdown, mudflow, steaming fulmaroles. Standing dead.

iii
I read it but I do not understand. While the eruption lasted it says there was a zone of silence sixty miles around the mountain where nothing could be heard. Beyond that zone, of course, they heard it from Saskatchewan to Oregon--that part is big enough to grasp. But a core of silence? I reread.

Koans, apparently, don't come with footnotes. At the center of the whirlwind, the still, small voice.

iv
Enormous numbers cancel each other out. Turn the telescope around. Condense your focus to its finest gauge. Imagination has better work to do than stretching huge
and thin. There’s a word I’ve been trying to remember, the word shouted by the young scientist standing on the mountain when it blew, the code which meant the moment had arrived. Two months of waiting, of study, measurement, anticipation… For two weeks that solid mountain bulged sideways five feet a day and still stood firm. There is a sequence of still photographs but no film of the moment when it blew. There is a tape, however, of David Johnson's voice, saying that one word, repeating it, shaking with excitement.

Looking for that word requires walking knee deep in ash, eyes focused on the ground. One side of your skull begins to bulge. Find the word; your work has just begun. Pick it up, wipe off the ash. Maybe Heisenberg would understand-- if you witness this you can't survive, if you survive, you can't have witnessed it. No amount of time would be enough to cram this into words. It would not fit. You must use code, something you can't forget-- the word for home. Your tone will do the rest. Shout "Vancouver! Vancouver! This is it!" standing at ground zero of your joy.
Amplification

There’s no need to be sentimental. Say the heart is a lamp burning whale oil or kerosene, clean, bright enough for needlework or reading. Not feeble, not dim, but certainly domestic.

Outside the night bulges with dangers, both the prowling, predatory, coming-to-get-you kind and the rooted, the lurking, the submerged waiting to rip the delicate bellies of boats.

And the heart, we’ve said, is a lamp. Then certain people, particular jigs of the pulse, some speeds of breathing create around the heart a Fresnel lens, a system of prisms and mirrors twelve feet high which reflects, refracts and magnifies that lamp as it floats frictionless on quicksilver, turning, dervish repeating, repeating a circuit of joy, its light now visible eighteen miles out to sea.
**The Sword**

Power is a sword in a ditch by the side of the road,  
half buried in mud and dung, its ornate hilt  
gleaming through last year’s grasses and burdock leaves.

Say that a woman, on her way back from market, maybe,  
load-light with coins in her pocket and headed for home  
sees the gold glint and tugs till the whole length is loosened.  
What then?

She’ll make an odd sight dragging that thing beside her,  
trying not to get muck on her market clothes. Many a man  
would believe he was doing the right thing to wrestle it from her--  
no business with such a thing, she could injure herself--  
and stride off whistling while she rubbed her wrist.

But say that the day is late, the road deserted,  
the lights from the windows beginning to glow in the yards  
as she walks the last mile, switching her grip on the hilt  
so the shaft runs straight down through her fist, a good walking stick,  
its tip toothing into the roadway and pulling her on.

Think of the uses she’d find for it, getting it home,  
such flexible metal, so strong and so sharp. It could be  
lever and lightening rod, cleaver and chimney probe,  
source of straight furrows for seeds in a small cottage garden  
and brace to keep doors shut against the black fears of the night.

But hearing the echo in the back of her brain from her brothers  
“Women--they ruin good tools by perverting their use...”  
being no fool, recognizing  
the true nature of this tool, she keeps it hidden  
so no one will be tempted to take it, learning  
to get the good of it without cutting herself.
A MIND LIKE THIS
A Mind Like This

is like looking through that drawer
for Scotch tape and coming up instead
with the instructions for the digital watch
you threw away three years ago, a maze
made of cheap pink plastic and three ball bearings,
the scissors you warned them were only for fabric, a roll
of the paper tape they gave you to close your eye
for sleep that spring you had Bell's Palsy, and half
a pack of basil seeds.

It's missing the Big Play because you're busy watching
the lovers's quarrel two rows down, look up
as the crowd surges to its feet around you,
touchdown. It's knowing they used sets from King Kong
as tinder for the burning of Atlanta
while being uncertain of your best friend's birthday,
forgetting the name of your fifth niece, but knowing Carlo
was Emily Dickinson's dog. When a mind like this
hears that Burleigh Grimes was the last pitcher
to throw a legal spitball in '43,
you'd think it had spotted a sapphire in the gravel.
It's saving pocket lint and bottle caps
while bread and diamonds thunder down the chute.

It's a theater where pleasure and frustration
are mutual understudies, a computer
which refuses to interface seven fifteenths of the time.
It's dutifully viewing the list of cathedral features
in Strasbourg, then watching the memories dragged like sand
from a beach besieged by wave after wave of years,
until only a bit of carved stone remains, a fragment
small enough to lodge in a human heart.
Of course you didn't take a photograph.
And of course sensible friends return with cameras
full of statues and windows and twenty-foot clocks,
asking vaguely, "Where was that again?"
Be comforted. This ridiculous mind will save
your incised memory of the tenth pulpit step,
preserving for you how some particular hand
carved under a stone leaf, small in all that grandeur,
his round-skulled puppy, sleeping, chin on paws.
Learning Curves

Sam Clemens liked the hat, the glamour and dazzle of river boat pilots. Charles Dickens saw in mastering shorthand the thin end of a wedge,

a crowbar to open his future. First you learn the alphabet, every point, bluff, broken limbed cottonwood for twelve hundred twisted miles

and back. Then the arbitrary symbols: a thing like a cobweb signifies expectation, the tremendous effect of a curve in the wrong place,

the difference between a reef that’s real and one that’s wind on water. They look the same. You have to teach yourself to feel the difference.

Knowledge is no accessory, medal, hat you can take off. It eats at the crumbling banks of self, adds silt and snags to once bottomless channels.

The madness of having assumed an impossible task. And you have to know it backwards, in the dark, as Bixby scolded Sam, even the bits you missed

by having to sleep, you have to be able to read it back and render it into English again by candlelight, galloping down a rutted road

with a deadline at its end, New Orleans, London, have to make Hat’s Island by dark, must know a blot like a skyrocket stands for aspiration.
“And All Trades, Their Gear And Tackle And Trim”

Hopkins got it right, the way the mind delights in shop talk, jargon. Love of craft becomes a love of tools and words for tools and words for skills in using tools, the haft or maiden, cullet, shaft or frass or frit.

The great saw blade goes dishy ripping oak. Flaws in your Sunday color supplement are called hiccups and cursing pressmen know they’re caused by specks which they remove with hickey-pickers. Adobe sells “alternate ligatures and glyphs.”

This need to differentiate, this passion for precision peeled your hand out of a paw just as using it in a three jawed chuck or five jawed cradle grip slowly changed the brain learning to fashion tools from stick, rocks, words.

So farmers have farriers, barrows, farrowings, harrows, creep-feeders, teasers, drenches, gilts and some of us, hearing scumbling discussed listen harder to artists, finding our reward in Strathmore four ply plate finish Bristol board.
Louise Erdrich Learning Ojibiwemowin

Two thirds of Ojibiwemowin is verbs
   and nouns aren’t male and female, they’re living or dead.
   (She’s learning the language so she’ll get the jokes.)
   The word for stone, asin, is animate.

If nouns aren’t male and female, but living or dead,
   what you think you know begins to shift.
Their word for stone, asin, is animate
   and that universe came from a conversation of stones.

Of course what you know will have to shift
   since every language has its limitations.
What’s geology but a conversation of stones?
   and even we know flint does speak to steel.

But every language has its limitations:
   French doesn’t really have a word for warm,
flint will only speak its sparks to steel,
   there’s no word for privacy in Chinese.

French has only tiede, which means lukewarm.
   Can you have a concept without the word?
Certainly there’s no privacy in China.
   So English added chutzpah, macho, chic,

until we grasped the concept, owned the word
   by borrowing it so long it felt like ours,
which takes chutzpah. Macho is learned, and chic
   can’t be taught, but both take a straight face --

borrow one until it feels like yours.
   It’s useful, too, for poker, tango, jokes,
all teachable skills improved by a straight face,
   by knowing what will concentrate your power.

What improves your poem, tango, jokes --
   she’s learning the language so she’ll get the jokes --
is knowing what will concentrate your power:
   two thirds of Ojibewemowin is verbs.
Tell Me If You’ve Heard This One

Surprise is what we value in a joke
we think, a different reason for the chicken
to cross, a deeper basement to the blonde’s
bemusement, some new group screwing in a lightbulb,
oddler animal walks into a bar,
the final wise word from the patient rabbi.

A priest, a Baptist minister and a rabbi
walk into a bar. Barkeep says “Is this a joke?”
Sure, and a good one, a world where every bar
is just as apt to host a talking chicken
as an ecumenical conference, but no lightbulb
ever flashing on above the blonde.

It’s compensation, making fun of blondes,
just like giving the punchline to the rabbi.
The proud are humbled, the oppressed triumph, the lightbulb
goes on – we get it, and laugh. A joke
turns power upside down until a chicken
can be the hero and walk into a bar.

And everyone seems welcome here, bar
none, not just the always-welcome blonde
but those who’d be justified in feeling chicken
about walking in, the solitary rabbi
stranded amid goyim who wouldn’t get the jokes
he tells at home, grateful that these lightbulbs
are dim. You’d have to be a pretty dim bulb
not to know that everyone in this bar
has been the butt of the lowest kind of joke,
history’s hotfoot, fate’s yanked-out chair. Blondes
took over one dark night and riddled the Polaks, the rabbi,
Cletus hazed Rastus, but yo’ mama fried that chicken

so good everybody was happy, even the chicken.
It’s verbal potluck: Luigi brings a bulb
of garlic, knock-knock the drummer delivers pizza, the rabbi
adds a little schmaltz, everyone in the bar
is flaunting their roots, eventually even the blonde,
The melting pot’s a plate, a glass, a joke.
“Rabbi, how many moths to screw in a lightbulb?”
asks the blonde chick at bar, “Only two.” “No joke?”
“But like us, you’ve got to wonder how they got in there.”
Kalamazoo Decides She Likes Her Name

It’s true she used to cringe when people laughed.
   She’d wish she had a normal name, like Springfield,
   but the way Glen Miller savored her name
   letter by letter helped, it really did.
She started to feel special, briefly drew
   those O’s as double hearts, then razor-trimmed it
to an edgy “Zoo.”
   Kalamazoo.
   She says it slowly, rolls it
on her tongue, over the pebbles in feeder creeks,
   the a’s flat as Midwestern prairies, the z
buzzing in wild lupines, that single l
   bobbing back and forth between the a’s,
meadowlark on a grass stem, the final oo
   waist deep in that long grass, glad
at having tricked your lips into a kiss.
I'm In Love with Leonard Woolf

his rectitude,
his long, thin face, his notorious horniness,
the palsy that trills his soup spoon on his plate
when he's underdressed among trivial people.
Oh, I'm in love with Leonard, but he thinks
I'm frivolous, not inhaling politics,
exhaling social programs.
So I've taken Virginia to Myrtle Beach.
I'm careful with her sunblock, and I make her
wear a gauzy ankle length pareo,
skimming the thin straps of her narrow sandals.
I buy her pastel drinks with umbrellas in them.
The karoake was her own idea, though:
"Bus Stop," by the Hollies.

We stay six days,
then Leonard comes to get her, stiff in tweeds.
I hope the heat reminds him of the island
whose province he administered and loved,
and left for love and still must carry with him.
Her bronze shoulder blades embrace him; her wide hat
and huge sunglasses don't reveal her eyes.
She radiates well-being. A single drop
of sweat gleams in the shadow of his temple.
I'm watching to see if he'll reveal his lips.
I'm hoping for a handshake, the chance to feel
the tremor stress magnifies, Ceylon
in the palm of his hand.
Chihuly in Kalamazoo: “Ruby Light Chandelier” 1998

Picture the Virus of the Apocalypse
magnified fourteen million times, the aura
from a mangled Aztec sacrifice, a firebird
exploding and frozen in glass and hanging
cross-spotlighted over your head
in an arched glass entry thirty feet high.

Tornadoes don’t hit cities normally.
Driven upward by heat, they skip over valleys,
bounce from hill to hill. Ours stalked straight
down West Main, swinging its hips, lifted
over the Christian Science church by the museum,
and stomped through Bronson Park. The Chihuly

wasn’t here then, that glass annex not yet built,
and I’m a bad person to cherish the fantasy
of walls exploding, the chandelier coming unhooked,
fly [ing into the dark air to join the dance,
circling with the bank’s black exploded windows,
the brightest charm dangling from Shiva’s ankle.
Birding by Ear

To my delight the tape's recorded voice actually says "Listen to the mockingbird." My amusement shrivels as I listen. How could anyone know enough to name that source with confidence? A cardinal's song stands out like English in a foreign country.

Every week I garden in the country and every week I hear another voice I can't identify, another song issuing from one more invisible bird, a bird to which I can't assign a name no matter how often or how hard I listen.

And so I bought a tape to teach me. Listen, some of us weren't brought up in the country, didn't have a grandmother who'd name titmouse, nuthatch as she heard each voice while fixing breakfast, greeting every bird with a neighborly exchange of name for song.

Some of them don't even have a song, forcing my tin ear to try to listen for whether they say "peek" or "pik." This bird sounds like he's en route to another country, one with a rainforest to echo back his voice--a flicker? The chickadee, bless him, says his name.

Soon, at this rate, I won't know my own name. Certainly no one listens for my song, straining to identify my voice, dropping everything, eyes closed, to listen and be transported to another country where song identifies us. And this bird whose voice I label doesn't know his name, not even that he's bird. Listen. Song is his country.
Irish Festival

The drunk was the only one standing between the bandshell
and the tidy rows of folding chairs,
and I was afraid she was going to try to climb
the shallow steps and stumble among the drums
and fiddles, although so far her feet seemed sunk
in the sidewalk where she stood swaying, bending her knees
deepest down, then up in slow time to the music,
screwing her eyes tight shut then opening them
and her mouth wide, like the charade for “lighthouse,"

so I’d averted my eyes to watch a girl
showing off her stepdancing in the aisle,
crossing and flinging her skinny limberjack legs,
nothing above her waist moving but straight brown hair,
the pain of cement on bare feet apparently
a fair price for the focus of so many eyes,
all of us grateful for a proxy who knew how to move
to such music, absolving us to sit
immobile on our anonymous rumps, so I missed

the moment he must have stepped out of the crowd
milling on the sidelines, handsome Aztec
face, flag bandana, and took
the drunk by the hand, courtly as Versailles.
By the time I noticed, they were dancing.
He’d put out a foot. She would consider,
then put out a counter-foot. He’d step. She’d step.
He turned her under his arm and she managed to turn,
actually graceful, dignity like a cape

he’d taken from his shoulders to drape over hers
in a sudden shower. Then some sylph in cut-offs
and a halter, weighing less than that woman’s arm,
bounced out of the crowd and cut in. He was polite,
turned her, stepped, one arm behind his back,
but when the music ended he bowed to both women
and disappeared into the crowd while the drunk reverted
to flatfooted fishmouthed blinking, looking like something
you’d never suspect was capable of grace.
Valentine’s Day in Kalamazoo

Maybe outside the ice remembers mud, but Cupid yawns and gropes for the remote. He screws the top off of another Bud. This is Michigan, too cold for mere gauze jockstraps floating over all this bloat. Besides, bow season’s over. Stretching jaws around a belch, he shakes his head. The laws against exposure make it tough – the cops get backup from the climate. Still, nothing stops our boy. He lifts his clicker and that young couple flares. Immediately she drops her protests and her blouse, he finds his tongue. They’re learning for exposed flesh, the best cover is the equally exposed flesh of a lover.
Mariah Educates the Sensitive

In the first place,
you are not allergic to wool.
That lie is the bastard brat
of ignorance, overheating and vanity.
You may be allergic to cats,
angora rabbits,
dust, mold, pollen, the stings of bees,
bad dreams, the semen
of Rh negative men,
or, if you were an axe murderer
in a former existence,
strawberries. You could be reacting
to chemical dyes, the sulfuric acid
they soak wool in to carbonize the hay,
sheep dip so deeply lethal
it kills on contact, bad vibes
from an old cryptorchid ram, hysteria
or bad karma. But not wool.
Never wool.

Has it ever crossed your mind
that there are breeds,
that each breed extrudes
a different wool? You buy
a crappy, scratchy,
certainly Suffolk
sweater because you like
the pretty color,
then brag that you're too sensitive
to wear wool. What do you know
of Merino, Spanish wool so fine
it makes a grandmother's love
seem cold and harsh?
Men were beheaded
for smuggling these sheep.
You could spend a life
exploring the differences
between Icelandic and Churro,
Black Welsh Mountain,
Finn, Romney, Jacob, Corriedale,
Karakul, Cheviot, Shetland, Lincoln, Leister--
both Border and Blue Faced--
Coopworth, Cormo, Targhee, Wenslydale,
Herdwick, Swaledale,
Cotswold, God forbid,
Dorset, Tunis, Polworth, Rambouillet.
Then you could start on rare breeds.
Don't get me started.

Wool is the perfect fiber,
the only one
which insulates when wet.
Wet cotton, silk,
are out to save themselves, leaching
your body heat away.
Like us, wool breathes.
Unlike us, it's blessed with memory,
returns to its original shape when washed.

Wool is proof of a benign, personal God,
is grace, divine intervention at its best.
It's why sheep are mentioned in the Bible
more than any other animal.
I made that up,
but you believed me, proving
you've had your own suspicions
all along.

When mercury freezes,
hang your quilts on the wall.
Curl under wool.
Wool knows you're a mammal.
It's sympathetic, doesn't just conserve
body heat--it radiates it,
melting your bunched muscles
into something capable of sleep,
making sure your dreams
fill with green fields.
Taking Jimmy Stewart To Bed

Not “Rear Window”’s Stewart, who could resist even someone as exquisite as Grace Kelly, for God’s sake, nor the one who kissed Donna Reed’s poor tantalizing face with frenzied reluctance in the telephone scene of “It’s A Wonderful Life.” And certainly not the Stewart of “Vertigo,” torn between love and fear, tormented. No, I see myself slowly unbuttoning the shirt of Mr. Smith’s innocence, certain I will be the first to manage to move him from flirt to frenzy, achieving the status instantly of Wildest Moment. He likes it, I can tell; he stammers afterwards, “Gee, that was swell.”
Sow’s Ear

I paid a fortune for this horrible yarn
years ago, this overspun, thickthin mess,
this inferior string whose grubby lumps
alternate with thin stretches kinked to thorns.
I was young. I was seduced by color
and by funk, the way an ugly, confident man

makes conquests through persistence, the tang of revulsion.
This is the Diego Rivera of yarns,
popeyed, pus-gutted. You could spin one better.
So could the woman who sold me this, but she knows
bad sells “because it looks handspun,” especially
when she prices it high. This is cynical yarn.

For years I wouldn’t knit with it. Disgusted
with myself, I forgot it in a closet.
So coming across it by accident last week
was bumping into Diego in Detroit;
after three children and years of happy marriage
it would be silly not to have a drink,

to cast it on. My technique has improved,
and as I watch the string and slubs form fabric,
as the plums, browns, blues slide through my hands,
intriguing, compelling, I see there’s no question
of stopping now. It won’t take long to finish;
I know I’m going to go all the way.
Quitting

Lord, make me pure – but not just yet.  
St. Augustine

“I quit smoking for four and a half years, and all that time I loved dating girls who smoked,” he confided. Well, I did have a disciplined friend who quit yet still would rush to stand beside anyone lighting up so she could breathe that first sweet kiss of sulfur, silky paper and tobacco. But no, that wasn’t it; he shook his head, smiling. “God, they tasted good.”

Oh yes, that tingle of sin on the tongue, before it numbs, before the palate furs, the bark hardens. You can copy Carl’s friend who swears by always wearing his nicotine patch because it gives his daily packs such kick. Or you can quit. Shake, crawl along the bottom of craving’s silty riverbed and emerge, clean and dripping on the far green bank.

The devil is delighted when you quit. He smiles, sits back. You clawed your fingers bald scaling the sheer rockface of repentance; you think conversion’s permanent. Devil’s not worried. The first tempting’s hardest: booze tastes bad, sex hurts, at least for girls, that first drag strangles. Ah, but now you have acquired the taste, know exactly what you’re giving up.

Now, when you repent of your repentance, you know what you have to look forward to. How long after the party before the Prodigal hit up his brother for money, before he slipped into the shadows, vanished down the road craving the smell of dung, a few crisp husks?
Bartricks of the Overeducated

These guys get nasty. Some nights it's like watching Hemingway bend a fork in his flexed arm, throwing it on the table, challenging Hammett. I've learned the warning signs: postmodernists bear watching, Sartre signals trouble. Kierkegaard means grab the cash and dive behind the bar; you'll be combing slivers of contempt out of your hair for days.

Once or twice in your life you'll see it swing the other way. At two beers Wayne agrees to give 'em either "The Shooting of Dan Magrew" or Auden's "Limestone." With three he'll alternate stanzas. Paul's singing "Rise Up O Frisian Blood and Boil" in Frisian, with his feet turned nearly backwards. As the applause dies down Kim takes the floor, demands silence, announces he'll recite pi to thirty decimal places. They start pounding the tables when he passes twenty. Backthumps and beer as Dave's friends goad him up, drunk enough to do his Dylan Thomas, sober enough to succeed. Di's bellydancing for a table singing "Stopping by Snowy Woods" to the tune of "Hernando's Hideaway."
A smell of scorching mean's Rybicki's turned himself into a sheet of flame again.

These guys are the Wallendas of tone. They know it all depends on upping one another without falling into ridicule or dignity, piling delight on unsteady delight. It's a nine-man tightrope pyramid paced over broken glass and rattlesnakes, blindfolded, backwards. A sneer could bring it down. On the other hand, hearing gasps, look up, watch one lose his footing, lift his arms and glide the last few yards onto the platform.
Necklace as Verb

Because jewelry is useless, it indicates civilization.
It takes an hour to carve one ivory bead,
yet you can’t eat beads, they won’t keep you warm,
can’t carry water, won’t keep off the sun.
Beads are a leap. One bead alone is nothing.

I flatter myself I could have invented the pendant,
one shell or pierced stone hung between my breasts
on a length of grass or leather, although the braid
would be beyond me and I know my brain
could never have coughed up the knot. But beads.

They’re tribal, reveal that nature once they’re strung,
when, side by side, their differences become
less important than their mass, where they can
turn into something flexible and shining
unified by an internal, invisible thread.

Of course the metaphor, the string, breaks down
before the beads--beads last. Which may explain
the ancient Russian grave they excavated,
two children laid skull to skull and strewn with beads,
with over ten thousand hand carved ivory beads.
The Kalamazoo Mastodon

The people of Kalamazoo have good gray souls.
Carl Sandburg

Nineteen twenty seven, Patterson Street.
Clarence Miller feels his shovel hit a stone
too long, too heavy for him to lift alone.
John Clark comes over, cussing in the heat,
bends to wipe off dirt and mutters “Sweet
mother of… that’s not a rock, man. That’s a bone.”
When the professors finish the count has grown
to skull, tusks, ribs – but no legs, and no feet.

It surprises us, raised on that refrain
about our good gray souls. Insults do stick
and we could be convinced that we’re born mild
except that science hints we may contain,
just beneath our asphalt, below our brick,
something big and buried, something wild.
Civilization

for Morgan

For the wheel to exist, someone in each generation
must reinvent the wheel, or rather, the axle,
matchmaker helping what’s separate to bear weight.

For there to be shelter, someone must raise a hut
with his own hands and thatch it with long grasses,
from a need to enclose twin urgencies.

If literature’s going to grow, he must admit
he has no word to describe her eyes, must look
at the night sky and link two different things.

Civilizations begin when we stop moving,
when our nomadic hearts agree to need
to hold more than they can carry. For fire

he’ll gather dry leaves, rub his breath across her name.
BETWEEN US AND WHAT’S COMING DOWN
Aftereffects of Bell's Palsy

Having a good and bad ear comes in handy. My bad ear, victim of a surgeon's saw screaming through bone to free a facial nerve has lost the very highest range of sounds—bats, telephones, sirens at a distance, mosquitoes if they're male, small children whining, regret, ambition's wheedlings, most tactful hints. Banshees can keen on my ridgepole all night long and, exhausted, watch me leave for work, brisk and refreshed from sleeping good ear down.

My undiminished left ear can perceive the beginnings of nightmare in a sleeping child two rooms away behind a closed door, hear the click of covert glances at a party, the first drop on the roof of the first rain of April, surmise the maiden name and color of the eyes of the grandmother of the boy my daughter sits thinking of, based on her breathing. It can hear loneliness seven lamp posts down the street, slamming like a screen door in the wind.
Stalling

I’m teasing out this chickweed’s single root,  
loosing that green doily when the noise

I didn’t realize that I was hearing  
stops. I glance above the treeline, spot

the single engine Cessna, force myself  
to inhale. They come out here to practice stalling,

to practice not to panic, learn to try  
the next thing and the next thing and the next

 till something works or till there is no next.  
To “boston” is to pause when you are waltzing,

to vamp until the traffic of the dance  
clears and you resume the swoop and turn.

Sleep apnea is almost never fatal.  
His silence all last evening might not mean

treetops rushing up, branches smashing, boom  
of fuel tanks bursting into blooms of flame.

Still, I let my breath out when I hear  
the sky hum, toss the bright weed on the heap
In Order to Swallow, a Frog Has to Close its Eyes.

You really don't want to hear about the mechanics, though you don't have much room to be haughty, sneezing in traffic with the same side effect, no more choice. We're passengers on the biology bus, reluctant or willing, lucky to find a place to sit, hoping not to be next to a runny-nosed two year old who needs his diaper changed or an old man carrying chickens upside down. We think we want a seat alone by the window even though what makes the trip worthwhile may be the story the grandmother tells loud enough for us to overhear, the one where tongues of flame danced over every head in the room where she preached, sang, conduit for Spirit.

Or it could be the sober ten year old with the box lunch on his lap telling you about the colt he saw born last spring, the swift wet slide of limp mess managing to stand, collapse, and stand. Oh, it is crowded on this bus, no first class, no reservations, there are smells and noise and something runs over your foot and is gone too fast to see. But in the darkest stretch of night, the quiet like a light blanket over everyone, you realize that for the last half hour you've been holding a firm, warm hand, you feel the breath of the approaching kiss and realize you're glad and grateful not to have a choice.
Lilium Orientale

Today I sided with the lilies. Not
Easter lilies, their cloying purity
too boring to violate. Not

Quaker daylilies, cheerfully surviving
drought and neglect to brighten July. And not
labouriously hybridized Asiatics

with names like 'Nutmegger' and 'Connecticut Yankee,'
intruding indestructable burnt orange,
chrome yellow on June's semi-transparent charm..

Today I sided with Oriental lilies,
great recurring stars with thrusting stamens,
petals splashed with scarlet and burgundy.

Even the white ones revealing a handful of rubies
strewn across their smooth skin, indiscreet,
flaunting themselves like courtesans at high windows

allowing a handsome but impoverished student
a glimpse,
their scent, part cinnamon, part jasmine,

one which makes you open your mouth to breathe,
a smell that looks you right in the eye and smiles
while it slowly begins to unbutton its bodice.
One Out of Over Three Hundred

Uncle Charles, ever since I knew him, could swallow his nose.

Thoreau.

Don can touch his nose with his tongue, Paul
could turn his feet nearly backward; my daughter can pop
each joint in her spine like distant fireworks.
People enjoy odd talents, peculiar gifts:
I can suck pleasure from the predictable.

Passion is rare, overrated and disruptive.
I believe Heathcliff needed a therapist,
know James Dean produced that agonized
look of devotion, ferris-wheeled with Julie Harris,
by not peeing all day before the shot.
I know it's a privilege to lead a predictable life.

Still.
Tonight I'm as desiccated
as any sponge whispering water,
would stand naked
in rain and forked lightening
for articulate love.

Tomorrow I'll flinch from the cat who suddenly twists
to bury ecstatic teeth in my wrist. I'll blink,
shake my head and savor affection and humor,
hand on my shoulder, unspoken mutual joke.

But tonight,
just tonight,
one out of over three hundred
I want wild words, hands
in my hair, impossible
promises, tongues
and teeth and being
valued beyond my worth,
rain tracing a path
between my shoulder blades.
To a Picky Eater at Love's Table

This isn't the love you sent back to the kitchen, the one you now remember as seasoned exactly to your taste, which you now admit you returned because you weren't that hungry and because you thought the kitchen would be open all night.

And now this is set before you. Ominous shapes in -- is it puttanesca? Hunan? -- sauce which stings the tip of your tongue. The smell which rises repels, attracts -- and is this pottery crude or priceless art you're not qualified to judge?

You miss the pretty plate, that sweet, mild meal which never burned your lips. I'm not saying make do. I'm saying it's a long time between meals out here, and gourmets are pressing their noses to the window for a whiff of what is cooling on your plate.
Lip Service

I merely took the energy it takes to pout and wrote some blues.

Duke Ellington

And oh, it does take energy
    and stubbornness, ‘cause if you laugh, you lose.
    My cousin warning “You don’t pull in that lip

a little bird is gonna come along
    and do something on it.”

The hero of The Thirteen Clocks

stumbling in a dungeon,
    in the dark, steps on “something
    made entirely of lip.” Terri says

her husband used to be a better kisser
    back when he still played trumpet.
    Nora Ephron says that once you’re married

    the kissing stops. Nina’s lover
    said in awe, “I bet you could smoke
    a cigarette with that.” Steve knew.

After she left
    he put his lips together
and blew.
August

Squirrels on the shed roof, trying to mate, don’t seem very good at it though the way he clasps her approximate waist with his almost arms, seems nearly tender, echoes the human. That, and the way, after several failed attempts, they stand still, separate, facing different ways, for many minutes, not touching, not moving away.
Sexing the Alligator

A twenty-pound turkey takes longer to thaw than you’d think, than I thought. At the sink, stuffing ready, I’m elbow-deep in carcass, grappling with an inner handle, one end of the neck, shank set in ice. It makes the bird seem turned half inside-out, like a casual sock. I am contending with something I can’t see.

The problem with alligators is even males go in an armored modesty, as interior and private as their mates. So one naturalist must grope inside, feeling for a penis or an absence while at the other end a partner holds the jaws, so weak to open, so strong to close.

My fingers freeze and burn. I’m running late. I’ve already thrown away the tidy packet holding the limp liver, the white-wrapped kidneys, the small, tense nugget which is the heart.
Letter to Matt on the Opening Day of Deer Season

November fifteenth, but the air's warm as blood.
   I wear red. stick to paths through open fields,
       imagining you and your brothers in these woods.
A shot reverberates. Silence. Then another,
   companionable in this solitary day
       as laughter through a neighbor's distant window.

I know the warmth which lures me out to walk
   spoils your sport. You're wishing we had snow.
       I pictured you tracking pairs of dainty prints,

but no, you said it's easier to see
   blood on white, it's easier to follow
       and finish the wounded. You hunt by holding still.

Men free of women, women free of men.
   Your love's alone this weekend --for a moment
       you catch her city girl scent. She's buying sheets --
three hundred thread count -- sitting in coffee shops,
   having her nails painted red. Her eyes
       brown, luminous, are everywhere. Distraction.

In this late heat success is pressure. Cold,
   you could take your time, but by hunter's logic
       leisurly processing now risks everything
your patience won, risks having it turn bad.
   In weather like this the knives can't hesitate.
       In your haste milk washes blood from your hands.
Neruda in Kalamazoo

Neruda shakes his head at Kalamazoo,  
but he’s half-amused. There, in the corner  
of Water Street Coffee Joint, in the flat cap,  
watching from under heavy lids with eyes  
darker than the espresso he hasn’t tasted.  
He’s working on a metaphor equating  
a nation’s eros and its taste in coffee.

He isn’t optimistic. Watching the slender,  
bundled young order their syrups, soy milk,  
(blood of anemic beans, he mutters,) he worries  
for them. Such dilute fuel for love with all  
those layers of wool, down, fleece to penetrate.  
He sighs. Even their pale eyes afford no traction,  
strike no sparks. It’s like wrestling water.

But as he shakes his head, he sniffs, looks up.  
Cinnamon. A girl at the counter is sprinkling  
cinnamon straight into her coffee cup.  
The young man at the table to his left  
forms a fist under the table. Outside  
the gravel is resolving into mud.  
Well. Perhaps. He opens his paper, sips.
The Genome for Luck

Sidewalk ice so thin frost ferns its surface,  
cat-ice. February sheathes claws to let us think  
we might escape. It’s toying with us. Wind  
that bitchslapped me last week today plays with my hair.  
On bare twigs house finches are improvising riffs  
no female finch with any sense will heed.  
The bird that breeds now will hatch blizzard babies  
which would die and take those fool genes with them.  
Still, the angle of the sunlight prods,  
the air is soft and what if they were right,  
what if this is anomaly, an odd  
but permanent early spring? Maybe those fledglings  
would survive, mate and spread recessives for luck,  
just the way others in my family tree  
took the right boat, chose to leave Oklahoma,  
going rollerskating a certain afternoon  
in Detroit in nineteen forty two  
so that when I looked up, there you’d be.
I am the calmest person here tonight.  
From my best settee, bare feet in grass,  
I watch one-armed Ephriam Bell up on the roof.  
The smell of smoke blends with the scent of roses.

By the time we saw the thin, bright line  
wavering in the dark, the fire had spread  
from the garret down into the walls.  
Fire at a distance sounds like rain.

Half the town is here.  The men disguise  
excitement with heroics, carrying  
tables, flinging clothes from upstairs windows.  
Someone else's shawl is on my shoulders.

Some fires burn themselves out.  Caroline’s letters  
used to come for him by every post.  
One has to choose.  Not opening the door  
to the attic gave us time to save the books.

Some things can’t be saved.  The parlor ceiling  
is down, the floor’s a lake, the yard a shambles,  
heaps of clothes and books rise everywhere.  
Maybe we should just have let it burn.

An attic fire thrives on inattention,  
heat breeding in sealed rooms far from routine.  
The light of flames through lathe was almost pretty,  
the way enthusiasm can seem harmless.

The smell of smoke blends with the scent of roses.  
Fire at a distance sounds like rain.  
Someone else’s shawl is on my shoulders.  
Maybe we should just have let it burn.
Tripping

for Vicki

Sugar, we're leaving tonight.
Don't worry about the kids--his guilt will nest them
cozy as goslings until you come home sound.

You can bring them shiny stones and souvenir spoons
and beer cans from Enid, Oklahoma.
But tonight we're gone,

windows all the way down cause we don't care
what happens to our hair, the night trees passing,
their hands clasped over our heads,

music on the radio so sad the headlights swim and blur
and then so hot we shimmy in our seats,
have to stop the car,

get out and stomp until the music ends
too soon.
We'll scorn the interstates, stick to the back roads.

Not outlaws, though--that wakes their posse instinct,
and besides
the hours are long and you have to be willing to travel.

We'll be the underground, we'll infiltrate,
slipping into town with the groundwater.
They'll think we've always been there, past the edge

of town, out by the water, where the porch
has two rockers,
one with, one without arms.

The pillowcases smell of wind and grass, the water's well.
There is no time there--we'll return the night
before we left, no matter how long we stay.
Your job will be
to name that big dog nudging at your hand,
prop your heels on the porch rail, and to watch

the fine pearl silt of happiness float down
into the crater blasted in your heart.
When it is full, we'll go.
Why It Didn’t Work

It had seemed a reasonable idea,
   to paint herself as this modest tributary

in late March, frozen, but flowing under the ice.
   A crumbling bridge, some discreet graffiti

underneath, not easy to see but enough to forestall
   criticisms of prettiness, to suggest disruption, tension.

But subtle, subtle. She had it all roughed in
   by the end of the first day and went to bed happy.

It rained all night. By noon a flotilla
   of moon colored floes was collapsing

over the millrace like clubbed swans,
   dunked, roiled, bobbing up downriver trailing

long streamers of foam as they slammed
   into the jagged mass jamming the bridge,

rammed constantly from behind,
   nowhere ahead to go but over the falls.
The Year Hits Perimenopause

Autumn has decided what the hell. She knows the symptoms and already frost has tarnished her. She's not a fool. She knows however much she feels like May the snows are coming, so before this chance is lost she's going to wear red, show off her tits, plump apples, bulge pumpkins. She is going to swell each bunch of grapes to cleavage and shadowed musk. Fuck decorum, honey, take a bite. Take two. Each day is shorter than the last and colder, so her unimpeachable night is thick with glitter, rhinestones, sequins, glitz. She thinks that maybe she'll even try her luck and use her license for a few young bucks.
Consider Hairs

Your nose and your ears keep growing as long as you live. Think of it: Lilian Hellman forced to tote that great zucchini, Auden’s unfurling ears. Cute is a survival mechanism; consider harp seals, ask parents of two-year-olds. So it's no wonder the carapace of age frightens us; almost certainly we will not develop sufficient charms to compensate.

Not for hairs, so often embarrassments. These aren't the secret hairs of adolescence: pubic disruptions, smooth armpits suddenly becoming caverns dense with Spanish moss. Those shames are secret. No, the hairs of age are public, chins and moles for women, ears for men. Eyebrows you could braid or bead.

But why should only those hairs flourish which are unwanted? If a wise providence chooses not to encourage six brave hairs arching lonely from ear to ear across the gleaming scalplands, well, all right. But why couldn't the forces of disintegration have evolved to encourage bourgeoning eyelashes, too? Just as cheeks grow softer and softest, why couldn't eyelashes come to resemble reeds fringing still dark pools where lions drink, grow heavy as Shetland ponies', as giraffes', finally closing of their own soft weight.
**Sewing on the Shadow**

In front of the mirror I’m helping my mother strip
her dangling drainage tubes, breast fed

into some hospital incinerator, gone
up in smoke, with the wind erasing

“Surrender Dorothy.” I’m thinking my mother the Car cinoma must miss the Fifties, Mr. Bland

ings everywhere building his dream house, home
from the war, free of Depression, happy

to be able to play a game of bland man’s bluff
which was called for us the summer Peter Pan

cratic cancer took my dad to Neverland.
For our parents bland was an accomplishment.

No wonder comedy was King, a Caesar
and his Show of Shows, everything black and white,

Amos and Andy the only color until the night
we dressed up to sit in a different living room

and watch a peacock precede Mary Martin
leading children from a nursery into night,

where the lost boys built a house around Wendy,
unconscious, hand upon her wounded breast.
Emerson's Eyes

[Emerson] now got his own future exactly reversed when he said, "You may perish out of your senses, but not out of your memory or imagination."

Robert D. Richardson

In the end, God cut Emerson a break.
That mind had been stoked nova-white for decades -- reading German philosophers, Hindu sacred texts, to light the meadow where Waldo wrestled with the angel of existence, demanding meaning. No one's word was good enough for him.

And he lived. Any star can fill the sky then fall in on itself, demanding darkness, die of consumption, the Hellespont, the head in an oven. He made his name then kept on living up to himself, refusing to relax. His first wife died at nineteen, coughing blood. His first son died at five. Death circled him like buzzards on a thermal. He persisted.

Finally God allowed that brain to slip free from the limits of language, like a watch spring from the constrictions of its case. The ideas stayed; names went drifting off. He started tying labels onto things: an umbrella became "what the guest leaves behind."

Look at the final photos, the portrait on The Portable Emerson. The brow is there, the eagle's beak. Look closer, at the eyes. As if through a backwards telescope you see the nebula which was his mind spiraling dreamily out into darkness
The Comfort of Pickup Trucks

I want warriors at my funeral,
each red necked, milk-chested fellow
in his one tie, a suit that used to fit.
They make great pallbearers,
are okay at the grave, in any role
where silence is required, but it’s hard
to get them inside afterward,
church basement, at the house. They clump
in the parking lot, out in the yard,
near the comfort of pickup trucks. While the women
chat and fuss, put out sandwiches, potato salad,
despair-black coffee, the men
talk in short words, call the dead man
by his last name, his clan. In the second hour
the laughter starts. They’re stepping back,
as they used to from the pyre they’d pile
with axes, spears, gold rings,
away from that heat changing flesh to story.
Lancaster, Blackwell, Burnside, Cowles

It’s a good cemetery, with upright stones,
    not flat plaques to make life easy for the mower.
Some old headstones are porous as sugar cubes,
    with names you have to finger-trace to read,
death’s Montessori method. More modern ones
    have the bright, hard shine of recent scars.
I’m here to bury bulbs. Rough country grass
    and clover, new saplings under ancient maples.
I’ve been here before. Today I’m looking for Don.

Dead or alive, my family gathers and clusters.
    After Don’s funeral I failed to find the Cowles
plot, but today it comes right up to greet me.
    My great-grandmother, my second cousin’s baby
are close enough for comfort. I kneel to tuck
    a handful of crocus bulbs by the baby’s stone
to wake them, sunwarmed, early -- clumps
    of deep violet cradling saffron stamens.
Too close to the stone to mow, they may set seed.

I always think someone will try to stop me,
    maybe the mower I hear behind the hill,
so I work fast. The first spring I taught school,
    not far from here, I looked out, puzzled
by a bright blue haze in every yard.
    Crouching, I found scores of cobalt bells,
wire stems, happy in grass, the entire town
    beautiful in ways it hadn’t earned.
Squills spread by seeding. Even the pollen is blue.

Thoreau’s last manuscript celebrated seeds,
    the strategies they employ, hooks, barbs and wings,
to disperse themselves. We developed feet,
    and wheels and wings and time and separate lives.
These days we mostly gather for funerals.
    Too hard to synchronize pleasure, but sorrow says Come
and we suspend our busyness and come
    to eat sheet cake, Swedish meatballs, three-bean salad,
to drink church-basement coffee and among
    the ones we hug, hug the ones who will leave next.

Don’s two sections south of my father. No headstone yet,
    just the veteran’s suspended star and two concrete pots
marking limits. I kneel, caked trowel in hand.
The ground’s still soft, clover roots just starting to weave a sod. I fold back flaps, plant handfuls of squills here, crocus there. I live too far to believe I’ll see them embroider this stretch next spring, and the next, see whether they’ll succeed in spreading spring after spring until anyone can see who I loved, who we were, by spreading pools of blue.
Watching Sheet Lightening From the Porch of Ann Paulson's Cottage While Aretha Franklin Sings Inside

The sky above the bay flares white, sustains it,
gasps briefly black then goes for bright again,
a mirror held up to the voice behind us.

Feet up, tepid chablis in hand, we let
passion by proxy wash over us, content
to deputize all suffering tonight.

Death, divorce, children, illness playing tag
or moving its toothbrush in, we here relinquish
stewardship to those more articulate.

We are content to let it crash outside
for this once, to let this woman wail
our desire for love, for a little respect.

It rumbles as we lumber off to bed.
Rain taps on this uninsulated roof,
sweet layer between us and what's coming down.
Our Third Wedding Reception This Year Hits Its Stride

The floor’s packed, partners optional. They play “Down on the Corner,” segue into “Shout”; we jump and hunker, our silk dignity outgrown and molted. Now it’s “YMCA.”

This homosexual anthem has become in the heavy hand of some god of irony, the current wedding classic. The elderly, the shy -- this dance accommodates everyone, like a favorite uncle, somehow still unmarried, who flirts with great aunts, spins the flower girl, waltzes gently with his fragile mother, finds car keys, coaxes laughter from the harried hostess, so the rest of us can clap and twirl and briefly notice that we love each other.
Pattern and Ground

All April I woke,
   far from home and lonesome,
to chickadees singing
   their “phoebe” courting call,
to robins flirting up
   then down the scale,
“cheerup,” to house finches riffing.
   It took me two weeks to notice
I wasn’t hearing the cardinal’s
   “sweet, sweet, sweet.”

It’s a child’s game,
   picking out what’s different,
orange among apples,
   fried egg in a meadow.
   “Which of these things
does not belong”
they sing on Sesame Street.
   It’s fun, even comforting —
we do love to exclude.

But in which lobe
   what neural neighborhood
do the truant officers lodge,
   the brain cells charged with noticing
absence, lack, the thing which isn’t there
   but should be. “The dog did nothing
in the night.” “That
   was the curious incident.”
“Funny thing is,

there aren’t any crops.”
   The skipped heartbeat,
the failure to inhale;
   just when did she stop
laughing at your jokes?
   No bogeyman can compete
with how it feels
   to turn from the elephants
and find your mother gone.

I’m home now and the dawns
   are vehement with cardinals
singing the perimeter of my yard,
    the way I celebrated for a week,
singing praises to my coffee cup,
    my own pillow, husband,
praise even to the way the water tastes
    pouring from my home taps,
sweet, sweet, sweet.
Washing My Husband's Kilt Hose: A 32-Bar Reel

You wash wool with shampoo. If you learn nothing else today, learn that, to use shampoo and water the temperature of a baby's bath. What I have in the sink here aren't argyles,

but proper kilt hose I knit stitch by stitch, gray for daytime, formal whites, choosing among dozens of possible cuffs, customized gussets to accommodate the bulging calves

of Scottish country dancers, whose heels must never touch the floor, perpetual Barbie-feet moving through jigs, reels, strathspays, till sweat and effort equal ease and grace. The ones who say

"the important thing is just to have fun" miss the most fun and the point, which is not fun but joy, daughter of the difficult. It's the kind of lesson climate teaches,

climates where sheer survival is success, complaint as bad as cowardice, the humor deadpan, self-control a given, not a goal -- an attitude empires find useful. Thermopolae, Dunkirk;

to delay catastrophe they place the best regiments behind, the Spartans, Scots, murdered or interned for the duration. The Spartans combed and died. The Scots composed a dance for captured warriors, "The Reel of the 51st." Bemused Nazi guards watched them practice, muscles taut as barbed wire. It's hell to dance. These socks are stomped to felt,

dancing defiance of captors long since dead. No one would knit these hose for any amount of money a Scot would pay. Only one currency is deep enough. I pat them out to dry.