My Gallery

in a small shed slanting in the Stickleyville rain.
Chickens huddle in its lee,
their tracks a palimpsest
through which I see
fragments of an ancient argument
rise like spirit writing
from the slate beneath.

1.

The hired hand of six decades ago
poses beside his team of mules whose heads
jostle in amazement. His chest is wider
than two boxes of kindling; left
jaw’s plumped with twist tobacco,
his coffin rotted summers before
my genes rhymed sweetly with matter,
rhymed with matter.

2.

See Grandmaw protecting the raw, anonymous child
from the knowledge of change.
Her sun-dark arms are dikes against the second law
of thermodynamics—their dissolution
let the dark waters down
to leach away the red clay of memory. She was
the first I knew to fall into the roily waters
where she floats yet, waving a peaceful farewell.
I see her when I shade my eyes from the sun.
3.

There’s Father before
the drop-hammer broke his guts
& sweat burnt ledges on the puckered skin of his brow.
His confidence is painful to behold. And Mother

in a gown that keeps her legs a secret
from all eyes, holds his thick arm
with a girl’s desperation. Where
is the angel that will drive them, weeping, forth?

(Its image is traced already in her womb!)

4.

Me at 19: a picture fading
faster than I can count.
My girth whittled
to a boy’s hips, I stare out
at vast hands holding the cosmic camera
thumb poised to press the final button. A stranger
to the thrash & sweat of reified desire, I hold
the potential of a son
in tender vesicles like
the knowledge of logarithms
in the sluices of my brain. Yes, I boomed

my promise to the ear-like
whorl in the muddy pond where the horses sipped their reflections;
rattled the future like a black box found in the back seat
of an Edsel stripped to its axles;
& scratched mash notes to the women in books, but why
do I stare off to the left,
beyond the boundaries of the picture,
the chemical gold of sunset
& all the simulacra of a summer day?
Two future brides circle in silence
one blond & tall as a Kentucky rifle,
the other short with hair
like a thicket in a muddy lot.

They’ll demand their photographs & they will
get whole albums to keep in the coming years, but for now
let this brief fossil lie in light
like the Archaeopteryx—neither bird nor reptile,
boy nor man—far from their febrile attentions,
the easily broken vows,
the bottles of Jack Daniels—
far from the cheap wage factory lines
& idiot fists flashing in bar light

far from every movement made in love or hate
let this final picture fade
upon its thorn.