

*Pearl*

At the pretzel stand by the food court  
a pale doughy woman perches on a stool  
and maybe it matters or maybe it doesn't  
but she has Down's syndrome  
and is handing out samples—  
thumb-sized pretzel bits and  
I decline—I'm *buying* a pretzel,  
I do not need a bite of another—  
and she regards me for a moment  
with piercing clarity and says, simply,  
*please*—not pleading or desperate  
just solid and unwavering like the Nebraska horizon,  
so I take a pretzel thumb  
which turns out to be garlic-flavored  
and for hours afterward  
its acrid smack flavors my mouth,  
and as my head cramps  
into a migraine, I am reminded  
that ingesting food of questionable origin  
is a bad idea for someone  
with food-induced headaches,  
especially if she is highly suggestible—and  
suddenly I remember Pearl,  
the pale doughy girl in third grade  
who didn't have Down's syndrome  
but something like it and  
when her birthday rolled around  
and her mother brought cupcakes,  
someone started the rumor  
that Pearl had licked them all  
and nobody would eat them  
after that, not even one bite.