

SO, ENGLAND!

I've been reading *Birthday Letters*—  
There's a copy in each of my places,  
London, Keele, Iowa City . . .  
I read, miming your voice.

I should not be ashamed to mourn,  
nor even to speculate about death,  
our ephemerality, so weightily felt,  
our heaviness of the moment, and so forth.  
We are great solvers, i.e. non-solvers.  
On and on, till the flesh gives up.  
Reluctant to the end, I dare say—  
or we persuade ourselves that what has transpired  
anyway is what we'd have wanted or had engineered.

The sides have been drawn up  
and already there's an echoing down the generations.  
Life's not attended to, despite your painstaking efforts to  
record it.  
Self-righteousness passes for virtue.  
You may have wondered if you'd not been picked.  
Redemption is called for—  
not on your account, on theirs.

You witnessed what evidently you could not stop,  
but there was no distancing.  
Afterwards, you did not alter course.  
What was to happen was not likely to be as calamitous as if  
you sought to change it, to forestall disaster.  
You continued to interrogate events, your own actions,  
to search for what might have been staring you in the face.

Once I told you that I was collecting poems about fathers,  
sons on fathers especially, though daughters too . . .  
Your response was blunt, plain:

“‘Daddy’ opened the floodgates.”  
Maybe you were right, the barrier once breached.  
What had been contained was let loose for ever,  
father incinerated, to be resurrected  
only in the words of his destruction.  
The child’s voice, in short, had silenced him,  
not allowing him to speak again.

I read your lines aloud and listen:  
your voice, tightening around the words.  
You had to struggle with what others mostly can let pass.  
You spent your fortune at the outset.  
Stage one was, as it were, the final battle,  
absorbing so much of your prodigious life.

Of course, had you succeeded,  
the rest would have been plain sailing!

England’s a small room.  
You sat in it, bulked there,  
bent over your writing,  
floating the walls and ceiling free,  
but leaving yourself in space—  
The smallness fitted you, like a second skin,  
to be peeled off in strips,  
scratched away in patches.

The loneliness, words could not dispel,  
the horror. Finally there was no comforting you.  
When death arrived, your explanations were drawn up, facing it.  
They had right on their side  
and it had silence.

*Saturday, October 1st, 1999*