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ECLIPSE ON THE DAY OF THE FIELD TRIP

There'd been an oversight in scheduling.  
Our class was sent out of the farmyard  
through a break in the lilacs and across the meadow

to tour the town first. Here and there,  
groups of phlox stood in the grass and dandelions.  
Our line relaxed and bloomed into clusters.

When they spoke of the eclipse, how long  
until another comes, how long since . . .  
they seemed in second grade, or first—years

younger than they were, and their guesses  
gambled over the century, free-ranging  
and arbitrary, as if it were the field

around us, unfenced and flat, uncut by curbs  
or posts or shrubs set at even intervals.  
When someone turned to face the sun

deliberately—half dare and half  
in disbelief, his eyes aimed under it,  
then away—the sun was warm on our arms.

When the field ended and a cinder path  
sent us east, we began to feel colder  
and had quieted, our line more orderly

and closed as we entered town. Women  
in long, plain dresses led us to the school  
where girls were given dress-length smocks to wear

over their t-shirts and shorts and the boys  
were given vests. These were kept on  
while they wrote letters with fountain pens

and posted them, while they made purchases  
by the pound, got a shave, served time;  
then, after the talk about telegrams

and party lines at the depot west of town,  
the costumes were pulled off and given back  
to the guides standing pathside to collect them.

Wearing only what they had chosen that morning  
without much thought, the bright and sloganed things  
they had wanted once, they filed out of town,

guideless again, into the meadow, the class  
of 2001. For what was there to touch  
in the field, and break, to explain the use of

and the process of making it by hand?  
It was near noon then, and colder. My skin was pebbled  
and the light was lovely and the greens were lovely and wrong.

We ate under the shaded sky between the house  
and barns, where in the rubbed-away ground,  
hundreds of crescents lit the dirt and winked.

In the outbuildings, littered with simple machines,  
periodically our guide allowed  
one volunteer to operate a crank

as the rest of us watched. And the one  
whose turn it was grew serious, and older then,  
capable of a multitude of chores.