

At the County Museum

Blacker than black, the lacquered horse-drawn hearse,
dancing with stars from the overhead lights,

has clattered to a stop, but its waxy panels
are dusted each morning, as if it might be summoned

back into harness, to be hauled once again
through the wake of matched horses, the sweep

of their tails, its oak spokes soberly walking,
each placed squarely in front of the next

along pin-striped rims that carefully unreeled
hard ruts the wheels could follow home.

How many times must a thing like this be emptied
to look so empty? Its top like a table

from which a hundred years have been cleared,
and the crumbs brushed away, with nickel vases

at all four corners, set down after a toast
of fresh flowers has been offered and drained.

And on the board bench where dozens of drivers
jounced year into year, clicking their tongues,

is a black plush cushion that for each, for a time,
helped to soften the nearness of death.

Retiree

For forty-five years, he pushed his hands
through the long sleeves of suit coats
and into the business world, where other hands
met his and shook them. Those hands, too,
had arrived at those meetings through sleeves,
through satin linings cool as documents.
Together, their fingers went over the contracts,
signed them, and pushed them away.
Such pleasure in touching the papers,
in shaking hello and goodbye and good luck.
Now his hands have drawn back
and rest all day on the arms of his chair.
Once in a while one finger lifts and waggles,
as if it were nosing around for a deal.