

Exfoliation

In Utopia the mind and the world merge,

so when the first frost in October shocks
the cerebellum's arbor

vitae, the ginkgo drops a halo of yellow

leaves, and since what's on the brain is also
in season, the leaves no sooner

rise in the wind than turn into the golden

letters that dart from Gabriel's lips to Mary's
scowl in Simone Martini's

Annunciation. Although her thumb holds

the page she was reading before the miraculous
intrusion, she can't just go

back to her book without considering

its place in the history she must now divide
into before and after,

just as when Rutherford bombarded a sheet

of gold foil with alpha particles, one in eight
thousand didn't shoot

straight through, as he hypothesized, but pinballed

back, deflected by something no one had yet
imagined, and he saw

how in the atom's swimming pool of empty

space there floats a marble containing ninety-
nine percent of its mass.

I have already at times been a boy and a girl

*and a bush and a bird and a mute fish in the salty
waves, Empedocles*

wrote five hundred years before Christ. Like sugar

granules, walnut dust, or coffee grounds that grind
away the dull dead cells,

revealing skin so fresh it gleams, each life,

he believed, exfoliates the spirit until it is
pure enough to join

the gods. In Utopia composers continue

reworking *La Folia* exuviating the folk

song as they have done

for centuries, and children, plucking errata

from seventeenth century folios, fling them
into trees where they turn

into goldfinches. Waterfalls smoothen boulders

down to gibbous faces so that they always
feel the moon in the stream.

Cottonwood

Even if most of them never sprout,
these summer snowflakes, what a life: to skydive
from poplars, each tuft of down

both parachute and aureole, some
of them plunging, some drifting sideways, some
rising on mild drafts, and some

flirting with every direction, veering
and bobbing till indistinguishable from gnats.
Of course they all land somewhere,

on shadow-dappled ferns, the tennis
courts, the soccer field, the lake, transitioning
instantly from clouds to clods;

flotillas fuzz the brown-green water,
dip no more than a thread below the surface,
flouting the iceberg theory.

Is Hemingway wincing in his grave?
With a single summer day to see the world,
who has time to be profound,

time for anything save relishing
appearances? Held to the eye, the fluff shrouds
the lakeside hills in cirrus,

as though the deity who chiseled
the land were a stuffed animal who flung his
innards across the sculpture,

quite literally expressing his own
inner life. Rubbed between finger and thumb,
the lint spins into a wisp

too glossy for cotton, more like silk,
with a limbo finish, not quite pearl or dust.
The seed is anonymous,

white, and flat as a dead fruit fly
larva, but come evening, the airy fiber
fringes the asphalt walkway,

a surfline studied from an airplane
window, the rollers foaming onto black sand,
chewing away the continent.