

*I could build a house  
with nothing level, plumb, square —  
but not to live in.*

In

It's like a club, and maybe you were hired  
or maybe you were tapped, it's all the same,  
you're in, that's the thing, you're in on the game —  
but first: the trial, the hard ordeal of fire  
and ice, the hazing, initiation. Admit  
it, you wanted this, you wanted in, you  
wanted a chance. Fine — you're in. And the blue  
vestments suit you, the rooms are underlit  
and filled with whispering — it's what you said  
you wanted, it's what everybody wants,  
that special smell, those slots where special coins  
can be the only tender, and you're fed  
the special food, you dance the special dance,  
forget to wonder why you even joined.

## Everything

If failure has a certain smell, we might  
expect putrescence, primal rot that stings  
the senses, shrieks *Go away!* But at night

it's different — sorrowful, sickly sweet,  
mistakable for better. Morning light  
makes it so much worse — burning tires, streets

filled with stinking garbage and wind that brings  
the stench home — rancid, foul, mephitic, beat —  
bad enough that failure taints everything.

But what if everything smells of success —  
not just the roses that bloom in the spring  
(tra la) or mint-fresh money (much too crass),

but any unexpected victory —  
maybe a bakery back in business  
in a liberated town, a pine tree

that made it through the storm, the still-wet ink  
on a just-signed treaty, fair winds at sea —  
why not the whole caboodle, everything?

And it's everywhere — the smell of existence,  
whether we like it or not — it clings  
to all that lives and dies, even the mystery

of space with its savor of strawberries,  
stone tombs that smell like time, death-kissed

carcasses, the crowns of babies' heads, raucous

bacchanals reeking of wine comingled

with desire, electrical fires, rock

& roll ecstasies, toadstools — everything.

## A Gentle Nudge

It happens sometimes — an unforeseen moment  
unburdened by yesterday or tired  
rehearsals for tomorrow — the world slowed

down like an opening rose with its scent  
and its color, a tacit hint of knowing  
without thinking of knowing, a gentle

nudge, no drama, no heavenly choirs  
or talking bushes, just the truth you're meant  
to stare into — life's steady quiet fire.

Pulse

A cloud of starlings undulating, rising  
in the failing light, boiling with urgent,  
unknowable purposes — the sky  
is breathing starlings.

Tonight it's fireworks  
and the fierce tang of gunpowder — the flash  
and the bang, the sudden blossom of light,  
the crackling drizzle of sparks.

This old-fashioned  
universe — same old wrongs, same old rites,  
always the one story forever telling  
itself: the point, the sphere, the eversion  
of the sphere, the ringing of the bells  
theorem and all things involute.

We're nursed  
on nothing, shot into the cloud of unknowing,  
spooked by murmurs of *Go, baby, go*.