There was more to know than time to learn, further
to go than good roads to get there. Nevertheless,
the governor crossed the state in a Pierce Arrow —
cornfields, hillsides of Holsteins, cranberry bogs
ripening to red, back when most streets still rang
with horses' hooves and harness.

One in ten had telephones. The countryside was wireless
in the old way. Even the Great War seemed distant
though already the ditches were dug where local
sons and brothers would die.

But there was more in the air than harm to come —
radical things — crowns were falling over the world
like cottonwood leaves onto the river here. Women
on the verge of the vote. A scientist dreamed up
a theory that bent space and time that year,
claimed truth depended upon where you stood.

But the wildest notion? — Enacted here — that not just
the glittering sons of the rich, but the daughters
and sons of farmers and mill hands might learn
the art of how we learn, and how we pass it on.

The townspeople knew what all immigrants know —
Somebody made a speech. Somebody raised a flag.
Somebody probably talked too long. Someone's mind
began to drift toward the river, the braided currents
that carved and cradled the town, light struck, reflective
where they rippled over sandstone and wound
through the outskirts of time...

Where half a century later, our first grade teacher,
Mrs. Sinquefield, arranged us in rows, the terrifying alphabet
scrolled above the blackboard, two shapes for each letter,
then numbers tumbling from everywhere and nowhere,
far beyond the reckoning of fingers and toes.

There was a tilted metal globe you could spin and see
the jigsawed nations blur in and out of blue.
She tapped a fingernail on the world's curve — We're here,
she said with an accent from somewhere further South.
She seemed older than the Bible to me, though now I know
she was much younger than I am, remembering this.

She knew everything, even thoughts inside our heads —
who tucked gum beneath his tongue, who leaned toward
the smartest girl on spelling tests. Whose mind wondered,
wandered, withered in place. Such things to learn —
why put a letter in a word if it makes no sound?
How can zero, which is nothing, make numbers bigger
than before? Once she bent back my palm, smacked it
with a wooden ruler donated by a local lumber yard. Strange,
I remember the smack, the sting, the company name, but not the sin.

Stranger still, by year's end, the terrifying letters
were somewhat tamed. A flock of them might flutter down
to perch on sharpened pencil points. Sing us something
from inside. Even the numbers began to behave.
There was a sign to make them vanish, and a sign
to make them mount. It was as if imagination built
an ark of knowing we rode above the waters, or maybe
knowing was the water, and how we rose, the wonder.

Pay attention, Mrs. Sinquefield said, with a voice
inside my head. I feared and loved her in equal parts,
and the fear was how far there was to go, and the love
was how, in time, unlikely as it seemed, I slowly came to be her,
and the love was how, in time, unlikely as it seemed, I slowly came to be her,
to stand up front and know she only knew
what that long gone governor knew, those townspeople
knew, what the current of the river always knows —
to keep it coming, you have to pass it on.

Somebody makes a speech. Somebody, maybe me,
talks a little too long. Someone's mind wanders
up the river still carving and cradling this town.
I once saw a grown man cry from the footbridge there
as the late light crested the current, not out of sadness,
but for the moment itself, beauty so brief it breaks your heart
just to mend it, for in the wake of such comes a bigger heart.

Pay attention, she said, and the world's blue blur spins again
in heart and head. And now, how strange to know she only knew
what the weeping man on the footbridge knew,
what all the elders knew —

here in the diminished light of harvest,
though Holsteins graze the hillsides
and cranberry bogs are bursting red,
it's by cultivating wonder
the commonwealth is fed.