Another rain cloud arrives by mail:
glum words, the paper thick and damp,
a limp handshake that won’t shake off.
Even Christ stands at the door and knocks.
But these letters slip through the mail slot,
already in the house when I get home,
a new one every day, its voice crowding my mind,
so like me at my saddest, I can’t tell us apart—
that sigh released when the envelope’s torn,
the little news of laundry and books, a cold,
a cooking class, a neighbor’s hurtful words.
Wet handkerchiefs made of paper, thin pages
recycled from other letters
that have had their say, been sent back to pulp,
and pressed blank for someone else’s need
to be heard. And then what? The letters pile up,
days and weeks of them, too many.
They slip off the table onto the floor, canceled
by a boot tread, and the sight terrifies:
to think of a knock and the door latched tight,
of so many smudged lives left unread,
their inky serifs never sparked and reborn
in another’s mind. Once monks alone
in damp cells, concocting ink out of dried
insect larvae mixed with rain water, wine,
and sulfuric acid poured over nails, wrote
their pleasures and pains in the margins
of the text, as if even the anonymous
need a witness, and holy writ knew
enough to make space for its scribes’ stiff hands
and agues, or a cat’s cryptic distraction.
What would those monks make of our neon speed,
letter boxes, e-mail, answering machines?
I called my teacher’s apartment for days
after she died, just to keep her voice
from erasing itself in my mind. But I was afraid
to leave a message, afraid nothing
would stop its fray and drift through earless air.
Oh letters awkwardly skittering across my floor
like drunks thrown out of bars, wounded angels,
one wing ripped off or never formed—
while the crowd clamors for money and votes,
your small voice makes me bend close,
till I can’t help but hear how loneliness calls
to its own, and, here—its own answers back.
Behind the wheel, as my stepdad grew smaller, he’d stop sometimes halfway into a turn and wonder where he was going. He’d shake his head slowly as if to hear some inner GPS, or to wake himself up back home under the twang of wind in metal pie pans hung from his carport rafters. Pie pans, wind socks, knotted kite tails—more like some grade school class had been asked to decorate his retirement complex, not an old man on a wobbly ladder, railing at blackbirds. If I shake my head, I can bring back those pans, their faint aluminum clang, bring back his pursed lips, his soothing sounds, all affection in old age, deaf to our past debates about fact and feeling, his endless lectures on goals while I stared at clouds, drifting inside my head.

No surprise years later when my daughter wrote in her fourth grade science report, “The brain looks like a cauliflower, or a walnut halved.” Or when my son shook his head, as if that kind of thought would send us all back to the four humors and leeches. He chose the surgery channel on TV, and my two selves clashed as if each would cancel the other out.
But what fact doesn’t come wrapped in feeling?
And surely feelings need facts the way rivers
need banks, not to mention the way bankers
need rivers, and my stepfather needed his boat
to entertain adjusters, appraisers, directors,
men who lived by numbers but didn’t count
on bottom muck and eelgrass oozing into
their sharp talk of expenditure and return.

What spoke louder was my stepdad’s weeping
beside his aged dog, his growing teary
over any gesture of love he didn’t have
to bully or earn, his pride in both my children,
so finally we agreed, it’s all mingled:
my son who knows ligament, muscle, bone
in English and Latin, my daughter who reads
the subtlest feelings that flicker across a face,
two sides of the brain I long to see embrace,
or shake till they create that tuning fork hum,
aftermath of plucked strings, small hint of music
feeling its way through substance after substance:

cauliflower, walnut, skull, old man fussing
over blackbirds that mess his car, hanging
more spinning, clattering pie pan contraptions,
as if sun splatter and sound haven’t already
filled to overflowing those winged tricksters.
“My car, my car,” his gestures seemed to insist—
driven by feeling as his skills diminished?
Fact is, long after it hurt him to get in
and out of the car, long after it was safe
to sit beside him, I’d sit beside him
who had nothing to do with my conception,
but who fathered me just the same.