

Leaving home

My first country appointment  
Was the last thing we expected —  
Three of us, caught unaware  
By ignorance and faith:  
Our dull-witted, frog-mouthed obedience  
To the letter of the law.

Counting door handles, ringing telephones  
And office boys with denture smiles,  
I waited three hours  
For a two-minute interview;  
Watching myself outside in the rain,  
My severed head under one arm,  
Body upright — best white shirt and tie —  
A black suit to outdo  
The Pallbearer of the Year!  
A red-and-white sign at my feet:  
“Cabbages for Sale.”  
The fiddler from Chagall’s village  
Was inviting me to dance.

The man behind the desk  
Never once looked me in the eyes —  
His face the back of my application papers.  
Hawk-nosed, crew-cut, with  
A *Tally-Ho* paper skin,  
He was the millionth person  
That couldn’t pronounce my name.  
No more, no less,  
The verdict came next day by phone:  
“You must go.”

We packed the car  
Like a war-time train — clothes,  
Books, records, the poems  
I’d started writing;  
Said goodbye so quickly  
I forgot for a moment where I was going.

Three hundred miles  
Up the New England Highway, I stopped;  
Unloaded my bags for the night;  
Swore that Head Office  
Would not see my face again  
Unless I became my own Scipio Africanus . . .  
Dreamt of three headless crows  
Flying in a room  
Whose walls were silently burning.  
Bald, toothless faces  
Stood at a window, laughing in the rain,  
Clapping to a fiddle’s music —  
Their naked, hairless bodies  
The colour of sour milk.