

Library

From the blank hush of my cubicle, I listen
to the library. Someone is coughing,
someone confiding plans to a phone.
In the cloistered cell next to mine,
the sweet sound of a page turning.

As a child, on summer afternoons,
I sometimes rode with my father
down the hill to his laboratory.
He would dissect his newts and frogs,
and I would walk under bigleaf maples
and dark sequoias to a library of seven floors,
to the coolness of the basement and its many books,
a permanent prospect of borrowed joy.

Those were the days when people
did not think to talk in libraries,
and the air kept a silence I could taste
inside my spine. I would rejoin my father
at the appointed hour profoundly pleased
with where I had been, carrying with me
sacred space, a way of dwelling.

After college, living at home a month or two,
I took a job in the public library
next to the Sixth Street railroad tracks,
where the clatter of trains and the quiet
of words negotiated a broken truce.

Shelving each book, I paused to consider
chance details about the author, a rundown
on the plot. Then I might see how
the first chapter began, and how the second.
I am there in the aisle when the locomotive
thrusts down the street, its whistle calling
to get on with the real work,
the book still resting in my hands,
the hopeless pleasure of chapter three.