

Pangaea together then rifts
it wide again, & I see it is all a taking, this walk-back,
a snatching of elements,
as the paintings
in their devolution become an index
of repo'd goods, the future coming to collect—

excess oxygen
sucked from Devonian forest,
tetrapod limbs
schlepping into fin,
& even this not enough
as time plucks back
the jaw,
the tooth,
the eye, the vertebral column,
until the first mural,
the last,
seems out of focus:

vacuous sands in a Cambrian sea,
gold-pink coral flutes, lamp-shells,
a single trilobite
trawling its hunger,

& I arrive at the Hall's entrance, now exit,
the slush & salt-puddled
stairwell that will take me up
past the elephant skulls & mock frontier fort
& into the blizzard

I was hoping
to outlast,
& it will be years
before I bother to learn
that the names
fastened to the Precambrian—ninety percent
of Earth's history—are exercises

in absence: [*bidden life*],
 [*former life*], [*ancient*], rolling back & down
 to the Hadean Eon [*hellish, unseen*],

where geology
bottoms out,

where the record
does not exist, but Earth as liquid-stone, superheated, globular,
rippling beneath
planetesimal
collision

& I almost wish the mural-painter hadn't called it quits,
but started here after all,
the beforemath—
one hundred yards
of museum basement
hallway slathered in Vantablack,

a Pre-Time Pit
 I could wander
like a microbe,
 eating light, palming
the not-yet air for purchase.