

## The Walk-Back

When the hand-painted  
 oil mural at last  
 depicts tiny humans  
 hunched in the underbrush of a glacial plain,  
 a half-clothed spear-ready pack  
 that eyes the gigantic  
 sloth & wooly rhino & one-toed horse—  
 & so oblivious  
 to the dire wolf in the aspen's shade,  
 the cave hyenas inching up,  
 mid-flank—I force  
 a time-trick, save them  
 by simply moving  
 the wrong way, moving  
 against the Hall of Evolution's  
 painted arrows until  
 Holocene [Greek; *entirely new*]  
 cranks back to Pleistocene [*mostly new*],  
 Miocene [*less new*],  
 & why not [*few new*]  
 & [*ancient new*],  
 until I am stunting the megafauna  
 to astounding smallness,  
 & the grasslands vanish,  
 & the hoof disappears, & on the other side  
 of Chicxulub  
 (simmering curtain,  
 iridium & light & ash & ash )  
 the museum murals become  
 waterlogged,  
 marshlands pocked  
 with Harryhausen dino-battles, the duck-billed, spiked-tail,  
 paddle-footed herds  
 thrashing for life  
 among the ferns,  
 & I start to jog a little,  
 & really feel the trick of it, speeding up  
 or slowing down,  
 taking the exact corner  
 that bolts

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

where geology  
 bottoms out,

& 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.