Blueprint for the Infinite

The existence of the infinite
is in every respect impossible.
—Maimonides

Here is pretty much how things happen.
Out in the snow, a figure
waddles his way up the hill
and the freezing wind blows so hard
that the bundle we know as him
smashes into a rock.
One dizzy sparrow grazes the windshield of a Camry
halfway back from Thanksgiving in Des Moines,
and a hundred-and-ninety-two cars trailing behind on black ice
skitter and crash outside Battle Creek.
Someone calls an ambulance,
someone else calls the newspaper;
somewhere in the rubble of the wreckage
someone dies so quickly that their life ends
before the telephone is answered.
Somewhere the sparrow
will be worshipped as a god.

In the Alps, strange winds gather
and glitter down the mountainside,
lathering the slush and crushing the lupine,
hurling the bees against the rocks.
The minds of the people who live in the valley
begin to burn—Alpine wind, Foehn,
and on the third day of wind the little villages
reached only by gondola
are hives of underwashed Alpsters
frying the mice they find behind their beds.
When the ether dome was in full swing
and anesthesia was still a strange dream
forgotten by morning, patients threw themselves
from the rooftops of buildings
to avoid the knife, hoping the firmament
would catch and save them. Or they endured
six men holding them down

as the sound of their old bones
fell to the floor.
And after defending the dancing of Jews
in the ancient city of Alexandria,
Hypatia was killed by a crowd with oyster shells
and shards of pottery—
they scooped up her heart
on fragments that once held bread and sweets and pearls.

In Polish the metaphor for getting ready to die
is that you are “packing up for your journey.”
Do you lie awake at night,
wondering what to take on your departure?
The whole universe, says Maimonides,
is composed of substance and accidents.
And the heart, he tells us,
is in constant motion, ruling
over the other members and communicates to them
through its own pulsations. If for one instant
the beating of the heart is interrupted,
man dies, and all of his motions and powers
come to an end. In a like manner,
would the whole universe perish
and everything therein cease to exist
if the spheres were to come to a standstill?

So if the wind gets an idea
about disassembling us, particle
by particle, carrying us off
and inheriting our ions
as it pearls down from the mountaintops,
should we pack a rucksack and wait for a ride
or take shelter in the bank of fog by the river
or cover ourselves with dry leaves
and play dead?  Stop, heart,
call the waves on the radio,
transmitting messages from the infinite.
Stop the luminous machinery,
the fantastical device of the bronchi.
Let the frozen script of the earth
find you and take you to bed.
Let the sheets of grass
and the pillow of moss
cover you sweetly.
Let the walls of your tomb
be painted with daffodils.
When they come to check for your breath,
whisper that you are already packed.
Close your ventricles and then your eyes.
When they try to flog you with canes
or take bellows to your lungs
to pump them full of life,
or when they lift your heart
from the socket of the body
and slide it into a cool dish,
just remember the impossible length of night
and the gravity of darkness as it pulls
its long slow chains across the sky.
Let them sigh as your last breath
curls back into the cold furnace of the ribs.
Farewell, sweet pea.  Farewell false dawn,
and tea that never wakens.
When the room is quiet again,
and the ether of the sky has dissipated,
you can slough off your body
and those messy shards.  Walk around,
feel your new ribs wiggle.  Your vanishing
is only the beginning of the infinite.