

A Sentimental Education

and when we were eight, or nine,
our father took us back into the Alabama woods,
found a great big log, and with his hunting knife
pried off a slab of bark
to show us the hundred kinds of running bugs and grubs
we would have to eat in time of war.

"The ones who will survive," he told us,
looking at us, hard,
"are the ones who are willing do Anything."
Then he popped one of those pale slugs
into his mouth and started chewing.

And that was Lesson Number 4
in the Green Beret Book of Childrearing.

I looked at my pale, scrawny, knock-kneed, bugeyed brother,
who was identical to me,
and saw that, in a world that ate the weak,
we didn't have a prayer,

and next thing I remember, I'm working for a living
at a boring job
which I'm afraid of losing,

with a wife whose lack of love for me
is like a lack of oxygen,
and this dead thing in my chest
that used to be my heart.

Oh, if he were alive, I would tell him, "Dad,
you were right! I ate a lot of stuff
far worse than bugs."

And I was eaten, I was eaten,
I was picked up
and chewed
and swallowed

down into the belly of the world.