Abandon

Breakers peel white as they see
the end coming. Days of dip
and slouch in the wind

all the way from Sheboygan,
deep blue, no salt, a lurch
as the current shifts. Wave-head
tosses back its hair, nods
to the muscled shore. Then
beach—like this one.

You can’t think of anything
to say. Feet sink in. A green
itch of weeds at the top of the dune

and downwind absence.
It should be grill and cold Molson,
Frisbee caught in the updraft,
creek dodging crooked rocks,
boots in the ashes of a wood fire.
Instead, broken water

and this sky of mine, hung
on a bare-branched oak.
If I write a villanelle today, it’s got
to lift the leaves and find its own
sad rhymes. It’s raining out. It’s cold. I’m not
about to poke around in this bare plot,
hoping I might spoon up a bleached-out bone,
some Saxon thing the villanelle forgot.

Plenty of rhymes—shot, jot, apricot.
My part is listening for a certain tone
underneath the iamb’s teeter-tot.

No one pays me to stir this formal pot
and other things are waiting to be done.
But the villanelle recalls what I forgot,
that words are watching for a six-winged thought,
newly hatched, airborne, not a clone.
It could be hovering right above this spot,
an insect with translucent wings, a knot
of overlapping lines, patterns known
to merge with night like oil of bergamot.
Yes, villanelle, that’s what I forgot.
I like the feel of fingers
and the bow. I get the notes right, not too much
vibrato. On stage, the violin

nods, strokes, and we're off,
strange entanglements that Mozart sewed in there.
Now she rises

right off the score, surges, circles
the room catching a scrap of sunlight in her hair.
I repeat, I comment

down here in the shade. Then the cello
steps off a pier, stretches long strokes into the waves,
dives, comes back up,

raises his arms to celebrate the wind,
then dives again. Meanwhile, someone has to
row the boat,

be there to lift him out of the surf.

Seen close, it’s a forest of vertical strings, darker or lighter. Stepping back,

it becomes a swooping lower lip, shadowed below, then a hollow with a glimpse of tongue and teeth, dark upper lip nipped in at the middle, fabric

stitched to breath and words.
Malachite

We meet at a picnic table in November sun. She has good subjects—Arizona heat, a lost friend, hard years up north,
father spotting a fox in the orchard, unmentionable suicides in someone's father's family. Tone is managed well,
a range of voices, all convincing. She has an eye for structure. Some suggestions: More details, images.

If you switch from ing's to real verbs, the sentences will march. The pared-down passages are best. And metaphors—
more of those? A little fixing and the poems will shine. That afternoon, it seeps in. Those suicides—the person letting
no one speak of them. The seamy men up there in Grayling. Blue scraps in the eyes of the lost best friend.
The tunnel, the scorching sun, malachite of a Michigan winter—I'm editing a life.
Novelist at Night

Enough plot and character—the lean belly
wants to dance. Small waves
shimmy up

from hips to shoulders, murmuring
their Nile-born syllables.
Snake arms

threaten and withdraw, a silk
veil rustles over breasts
and shoulders,

then opens to a belly smoothly buttoned.
Her hips enjoy the pelvic sea-surge,
what they call

the Dolphin. She’s not on stage, she’s here,
her back to the fireplace,
before a room

of writers, composers, artists who let
their pens and brushes slide
back into the drawer

when her live flesh answers to the lifts
and twists, the low-down
undulations
of the oud and dumbek. We lean in, think up some images: hips left and right

are the crossing signal stopping traffic while the train roars through.

No, her moves stay close to home, joints and muscles trading their quiet gravity.

Still, we look—wondering what subtle engine might be weaving down that track.
Spotted Sandpiper

looks out
over the Lake

to see what
might be waiting.

A freighter inching
toward the Soo,

two gulls on a rock,
a flock of yellowlegs,

heads down, tails up,
nabbing a meal.

A kestrel drops
to take him,

but the piper
goes for the water,

dives, swims the seaweed
like a fish. Hawk gone,

he flies straight up,
water to air. All

the elements but fire,
he owns them.
Garlic Mustard

It’s up, an early riser, stretching,
unrolling its leaves under the bare
trunks of the hickories, ashes, oaks.
All the March air lacks

is a pinch of garlic, and the mustard
has it, just the scent to bring
the bare woods back for an April
feast. We all admire

the innovators, the Japanese
who plant their Prius out on the hybrid
road all by itself. That’s garlic
mustard dancing, scattering

seeds, while the staid dandelion
roots down, lays out its leaves,
issues again its standard bloom.
Garlic finds a new

continent, deep shade, oak leaves
where annuals have never hoisted
green flags before. Invasive, we say.
Dutifully, I pull up

handfuls of slim stems and pitch
them in handful after handful,
until the dumpster’s full. The garlic
exits gracefully.
Its roots are shallow, letting go, nodding to my zeal, which, it knows, will wane. Yes, pull the roots, it says.

You’ve left some rich, moist soil loosened up. My seeds are sleeping there.
Juice in the Pan

Grandmother grips the rooster’s legs,  
lays his neck  
on the bloody stump,  

and lifts the axe. Strikes. She tosses  
the bird. It runs  
in the yard looking for  

its head. Not here? Maybe over here?  
Then where?  
Once around, it drops.  

She dips him in scalding water, gets down  
to meat, pitches  
feathers and feet, takes  

the rest inside. An hour gone. Then  
out of the oven,  
breast, wings, thighs—  

newborn, greased and golden, steaming,  
juice in the pan.  
I wish the hens could see  

their man. They’d circle,  
spreading their wings.
The second movement has had its say. Time to close it up. Mozart lets the chords fall in place, they know their way . . . but no, a detour, a ripple up then down, backing off for another stretch of melody then circling again. He knows it has to end, but not till he ornaments that phrase from the viola, lets the cello meditate a while to digest what's just been said— or at least recall some triplets, some five-noters, a crooked run to ease the ear into the sad silence that will follow. A long-held chord, the violin reluctant, wavering. Another movement's waiting. Mozart steps up a half note into a new world and listens.
Vows

The neighbors’ rhododendron
seems to have forgotten
how to bloom:

plates of polished leaves
and, in the center,
upright buds,

wrapped, muscular, not
going anywhere, like
high school
linemen, tall on the field,
who never graduate.
Across the road,

those rhododendrons wave their
Kleenex-white diplomas
right on schedule.

Then, one opens here, midnight red.
Those buds weren’t linemen,
they were nuns,

closing their hands around
the rosary, renouncing
everything
until those beads murmured
their way out, velvety,
baroque, a color

stolen from a Spanish church
in Cuernavaca, more lush
for waiting,

passion stored in curving sepals
to let it ripen. What vows
do they intend

to keep? The cloister’s open now,
tongues and palms and petals
all unfolded,

inviting anything with wings.
You hear it even in the villanelle—
the subtle elbowing of lie and lay.
They both go down to bed—so who can tell?

But neither one will wish the other well.
“No transitives in here,” cool lie will say,
stretched on her sofa in the villanelle.

Lay points out what couples know full well
that lie implies some distance—there, away—
when two go down to bed, in parallel.

All seems quiet in stanza four until
lay lets two sensuous voices have their say,
active and passive, nuzzling in the villanelle.

Let’s have them both, lie, the asphodel
that littered the Elysian Fields, and lay,
the drooping blooms of fuchsia on the sill,

each offering its high-tongued syllable
as you and I lie waiting in the hay.
Together they invite the villanelle
to sing, to pass the savory muscatel.