

LAST RITES

It rained cottonmouths for 30 days after you died.
They wore proud boots and took over the streets,
slithered and kicked through the steel-plated doors.
They sat coiled or casually dropped in your special recliner.
They ate the last Tyson's chicken in Arkansas—they did!
and then ravaged the okra and bean patches out back.
Then they took the tomatoes and purple-hull peas,
cutting a swath like Sherman's army marching to sea.

Their white mouths turned a deep heliotrope purple.
We plied them with offerings of heavy red wine
and they turned all purple and died. We swept snakeskins
for weeks. Next the bats came, echolocating what we
humans heard only as a series of slight erratic clicks.
We developed a decoder that could read bat-tongue for us
and learned that they repeated through the walls a gossip chorus:
"You know he heard the wind chimes just before he died, a music
that played so hauntingly on the listening ears of time."

We banged every pot and pan in the house like a marching band
starting off a Fourth of July parade with John Phillip Souza's brass
until they gave up their roost, a lonely, leaning excuse for a chimney.
When finally we wept and muttered a flood of desolate words
over your cavernous deep rhombus in the earth, a dark hole really,
an aunt we barely knew said to me, "Give me your last skinny-back
wishbone hug and tell us how thin we've become."