from Dead Men’s Praise

Analfabeta
for Laura Dondoli, in memory of her great-grandfather

I have a friend whose great-grandfather learned to read
From an uncle blinded in battle under Garibaldi
He wanted Dante read to him aloud

And the boy learned to distinguish our unwieldy
Signs as simple sketches from his world,
Each with its unalterable memory:

Did he see two mountains touching, side by side?
They initiated Magic, Music, Mastery.
A three-pronged pitchfork’s unsupported head?

Excellence, Echo, Elasticity.
And the boy, who was bright, apparently, as well as feisty,

Found out what he hadn’t known there was to know:
That his own, close-fisted, monotonous world
Would yield unmingled treasure, canto by canto –

That the unacknowledged mist inside his head
Could be converted to explicit rapture.
His uncle’s illogical and graceless code

Would root out pervasive music everywhere,
A face one encounters always, once acquainted . . . .
But am I wrong in also thinking he learned more

Than those of us for whom someone merely pointed,
Uttering a too-fast string of monosyllables
(With one bright lingering W)? He circumvented

Our sullen lines and curves, random intangibles,
The shortest, quickest distances to sounds.
To him, markings on the pages were parables:

Suns and stars were things a snake surrounds;
Vision started when a bird tried out its wings;
All imprinted words were loopy compounds
Of language’s intent and actual things . . . .
I envy him. For me, it’s artifice,
But every time he read, his uncle’s moorings –

*Does it look like the rind of a devoured slice*
*Of melon turned upon its side? That’s C –*
*Kept him dreamily in place. . . . .*

Unless those early portraits fell away
And he, like the rest of us, just followed signs
Into the inner sanctum of what Dante –

Oblivious to his letters’ prongs and wings and moons –
Required, simply, three strong rhymes to say.
My friend’s grandmother remembered hearing lines –

Her father’s favorites – almost every day.
He would read them, overcome, in the kitchen,
After which her mother would shrug and say

That the ravings of a drunkard or a madman
Would make more sense to her than all this poetry . . . .
Still, he’d read out line after line

And what I want to know is, did every Z
Flash – as he read along – with sudden lightning?
Was there an awkward kiss in every A?

Was each H a ladder with one rung?
And did he see on that one rung – like the runaway
Whole stole his only brother’s only blessing –

A sudden envoy, winged and otherworldly?
If so, was it climbing or descending?
Did it disappear or did it stay?