We have a problem with Brandon,
the assistant warden said.
He's a poet.

At the juvenile detention center
demonic poetry fired Brandon's fist
into the forehead of another inmate.
Metaphor, that cackling spirit, drove him to flip
another boy’s cafeteria tray onto the floor.
The staccato chorus rhyming in his head
told him to spit and curse
at enemies bigger by a hundred pounds.
The gnawing in his rib cage was a craving for discipline.
Repeatedly two guards shuffled him
to the cell called the box, solitary confinement,
masonry of silence fingered by hallucinating drifters,
rebels awaiting execution, monks in prayer.

Then we figured it out, the assistant warden said.
He started fights so we'd throw him
in solitary, where he could write.
The box: There poetry was a grasshopper in the bowl of his hands,
pencil chiseling letters across his notebook
like the script of a pharaoh's deeds on pyramid walls;
metaphor spilled from the light he trapped
in his eyelids, lamps of incandescent words;
rhyme harmonized through the voices
of great-grandmothers and sharecropper bluesmen
whenever sleep began to whistle in his breath.
So the cold was a blanket to him.

_We fixed Brandon_, the assistant warden said.
_We stopped punishing him. He knows
that every violation means he stays here longer._

Tonight there are poets
who versify vacations in Tuscany,
the villa on a hill, the light of morning;
poets who stare at computer screens
and imagine cockroach powder
dissolved into the coffee
of the committee that said no to tenure;
poets who drain whiskey bottles
and urinate on the shoes of their disciples;
poets who cannot sleep as they contemplate
the extinction of iambic pentameter;
poets who watch the sky, waiting for a poem
to plunge in a white streak through blackness.

Brandon dreams of punishment,
stealing the keys from a sleepy jailer
to lock himself into the box, where he can hear
the scratching of his pencil
like fingernails on dungeon stone.