Ohio

The word is delectable
its amphibrach tells us
softly go home, read
the wrinkles in our parents’ lips
walk down the fallen street
and watch the planets rise
after sunset like we did
when we got our first eyeglass

or walk down the street
and pick up a maple leaf
and rub it so the smell
livens the night.
We know the state is not like that
it never was.
Ohio has our cities
but they are not like your cities
they are deep and steel

they scrape the ground for purchase
and the night is never alive
for it smells of clay and grit.
We live in monstrous quarters
with little to think about
but our lost arts:
Ohio has a Rodin
he sits in the center of the city
(like countless Thinkers in
many cities—there is one

in Palo Alto, and many in
Europe) but he is different
from yours.
Two generations ago we bombed
the Thinker in a race riot
and despite everything we could do
his leg is unwrapped and warped
full of water.

You read about Ohio
glacier-fed and wild
then we tamed it
reflattened it
dug onto it as hard as we could

Old Ohio is just a state of mind
in the forest of our lot
its ancient shrubbery
and tribal mound-men
scrabble about from their
preliterary perch,
they whisper that
this cannot be right.

But is it so wrong?
We wish Ohio was like the word
ohio, but we know it was never
like that, never
so soft or oily,
with a little gasp,
or a blurred vowel,

we skipped that
went straight from the glaciers
to the gilded age
with some pioneering
in between.
Haven’t things gotten better?

When I walk down the lane
where I walked before
there are leaves, stuck to me
there are wind-calls, in the air
there are footsteps, and I wave
to a grey neighbor
maybe that’s Ohio,

or maybe when I go to school
on a bus so yellow it’s tragic
and the driver has made
the black kids sit in the front
and I thrill to sit in the very last seat
where the window is cold
with my inhalation
or is it landing in the city
returning to the scene
with a vibration
and sensing it lit and moving
below me, and animal
the dewy lights a monument to the electrical
the ingenuity of my people?

My people: it is anachronistic
this is what Sitting Bull would have
called the Sioux his people
but we do not say that
if we are not nearly extinct.
Who is an Ohioan today?
We are, we say

but what is there here but museums
where we go and we see
the Thinker and his busted leg?
There is a walking song I knew
when I could barely walk
it has a march beat

but a spring in its tempo
some pizzazz too, maybe
and my parents and I
would sing it aloud
on the crackling streets
when I was an Ohioan.
I wish I had known Ohio

then because it would not
have stung me so much:
knowing Ohio grabs into
us and it’s the knowledge
that the language we speak lies
the end of the onomatopoeia.

Voice actors have beautiful
baritones, timbre like we cannot
believe, for if you could talk like
anyone, why would you talk
in uppercase, or with a drawl,
no, you’d talk like an ohioan
and it’d be a lie.