James Plath

THE BOY WHO WOULD BE GOD

It all began when his grandfather died
and he sat erect, craning to see, waiting
at the "wake" for the old man to push
through the heavy scent of gladiolas
and satin pillows—to rise again and join
them in singing "Heaven is my Home."

Back then, too much seemed staged
for his benefit, to teach him some lesson
about kindness to animals, or not putting
pennies on railroad tracks. But the voices
soon died and the organ rolled on like a diesel
locomotive, so full of bass that he felt the rattle.

In the picture he has, his grandfather looks
like Dwight D. Eisenhower, who in every book
gives fatherly advice to soldiers wearing boot
black under their eyes. Like big-league ballplayers,
they huddle around the secrets of winning: be
frugal, show respect, tell the truth, do your best.

In his dreams, the boy walks single-file again
across planks in the cemetery rain. Clay melts
into mud, sludge pools beside a bottomless hole.
But the boards extend like straws stuck end to end,
long as the tunnel they're building now under the English
Channel, sealed off from the sea and the smell of flowers.

Years later, in stiff November, hunting with a high school
friend and his father—one shot turning cottontails
to quiver—he's shown how to slice from anus
to breastbone to remove the entrails. In the cold
old shed beside thin ice, current sluggish under skim,
he tears the skin and watches the animal's spirit

rise: just one quick puff of steam.