

## NOW AND THEN

I remember something that seems important:  
Now, it does; then, it didn't.

Now, it's as warm and smooth as an egg in the sun,  
about to hatch.  
Then, it was cold, raw-edged with emotion,  
nothing much.

The musty halls at our rural high school,  
sprinkled with oil to dampen the dust.  
The dust, like our zeal, cropped up anyway in 1963 -  
that brief muttering brink-of-things -  
and still does, as our class of war-babies  
traces a finger through two decades of dust.

In the narrow sanctuary, the heart of the lofty school house,  
Mr. and Mrs. Janitor used to wait for us to leave  
before flicking their oil over the hazy floors  
and the ghosts of our untrammelled youth.

She called him "Mr. DeLoach;"  
he called her "The Missis."  
And how we laughed because they were old  
and stale and out-of-step!

The iron-cold restroom,  
lurking crude beasts of white porcelain  
in stalls along the gray wainscoting.  
A door-sized window,  
painted gray to discourage the Toms  
from peeping on our giggles and tears.

I lost my boyfriend's class ring  
down the growling drain.  
And Mr. Janitor dismantled it,  
joint by clanking joint,  
wresting it from the throat of the pipe.

Chuckling, knowing,  
he dropped it in my hand.

Oddly, a door led from the restroom  
along the walls of russet bricks,  
to the playground lined with paths,  
like those used by prisoners  
filing out for sun on raw days.