

## ***Ars Moriendi***

*And trust not that the tenderness of your age shall lengthen your life; for as soon, if God call, the young goeth as the old; labour always to learn to die.*

- *Lady Jane Grey, in a letter to her sister, written the night before her execution.*

This is not the hour for a *cri de coeur*.  
Below, they are erecting  
my scaffold. Contented men spit

and barter salacious remarks  
while they attach one plank  
to another. The hammer

is regular enough  
to be maddening. A knock.  
The holy man has come to talk

the finer points of denomination.  
He smooths his cassock and relaxes  
into a finessed set-piece

about free will. I listen  
for the bell that tolls  
the time lost, and drum my fingers

at a gallop. There is so much  
still to be done – all of death's  
intricate etiquettes. First,

the farewell letters –  
*dear father, dear sister,*  
the display of acceptable sentiments.

Accommodations must be made  
for the official guests. Then,  
there are the speeches,

though I will most likely quote  
from the classics – *purge me*  
*with hyssop* – that hint

of minty astringency  
suggests a cleanliness  
available only to the dead.

Finally, there's the risk  
of offence inherent in selecting  
the recipients of gifts; I decide

on a prayerbook for the jailer,  
and for the axeman, nothing  
but forgiveness. The priest

keeps talking as the sun rolls downhill.  
He says are you sure  
you wouldn't like a confessor –

some non-secular comfort  
for this final night.  
I tell him no-one will know

what it is that I ask  
of the god with whom  
I am intimate. With that,

the holy father is dismissed.  
I look down. The lamps  
have all been lit. Men begin

to spread the absorbent straw,  
singing songs  
that sound nothing like hymns.