A letter on the anniversary of the death of Arcangelo Gabriele - Henry Allison

standing in a small coat a slightly larger boy

it must have been in Italian that they told him his name

was Frank Gabriel now that Arcangelo Gabriele had died

on the boat. at his funeral his life was burnt down and turned

into a cross his father strung around his neck so he wouldn’t forget

he tucked it beneath his shirt and as a new person freshly created walked

in the streets with the people crushing like a wave he sought

to be beyond the high water mark when the wave crested

to be entrenched rooted sunk clinging when it receded

back into the ocean.  I like to think that when he walked

at night he thought like I do about the millions of horizontal people

lying all around him like packages in a sprawling factory united

together truly only when they dreamt and their night selves climbed

undaunted up the ladders that by day proved too frail

for the weight of their bodies

that type of climbing leaves marks on the hands

that fade with years, covered eventually by wrinkles

that obscure the stories    of holding things  of loving

of the cold,  quiet men and women at the heads of tables dying

into the air when the generations flip like pages

not much from the last is recorded on the next

nothing but a few facts and other entries

that he was a plumber,  two stories: that

of his name and only one of his life, that when he was a child

he used to hide in the barrels when the labor

people came.  he had eight sons, the eighth was

the first to go to college a biology teacher

a grandfather a good man whose wife

a secretary too smart for her gender bought stock

in the hours when the children were asleep

and the sewing was done

my mother spurned the city the urban spill

the grind and took me to Vermont to raise me

where the animals take the flat land and the people

barricade themselves in the hills    where there is time

to watch fires burn through their lives, where people

talk about the land like they built it birthed it

fostered it bled for it like they go back

with it which they do only because these are new

forests growing in the places where their ancestors

were clear cut not many centuries ago we have

a different word for the clear cutting of people

but that doesn’t mean it didn’t happen too

or that the story of this isn’t a little bit the story of that

but the path my mother walked I walked it back

and sit now one more time in those eastern cities looking

to bleed these hands the name Gabriel does not end

my name and so I am at odds a bit with his story

the college boy instead of the laborer I am who he saw walk

by to somewhere as he took his lunch break I am the

hoped for future I am the better life for his children

I am what his parents crossed oceans for I am what

they  killed for when they held their son down

in the Hudson and pulled him out baptized anew

in the land of freedom

and I am just as new in these streets as he was

and twice as young