

Millennium

On December 30, 1999, by the hood light
of my range in a dark kitchen I eat pears
my mother canned in 1992. The at-once
tumble of all four digits has set the world
on edge. What have I not done?

I have not changed all my money
for gold. I have not built a bomb shelter
where tomorrow wife, daughters, dog
and I could descend before, at midnight,
the computers of the world lose a century
and every record of my existence,
before the jets over Greenland and Peoria
forget there is a tomorrow and drop
from the sky—along with their precious
cargo of miniature malt whiskeys,
tiny bags of peanuts, and pilgrims
planning to be somewhere new by breakfast.
Before the intelligent clocks forget
all the protective treaties ever
signed and launch their payloads
of mutually assured destruction
at the rooftops where tipsy revelers
sip champagne and forget one another's
names, or why they wore this particular
array of gaudy pointed hats.

I have neglected to stockpile
potted meat and missile-shaped
plastic bottles of water. I should,
in fact, have saved these pears,
and had, instead, one of the bananas
on the counter, whose ridges this last full
night before the millennium are darkening
like the areolas of a woman near term.
Instead I padded to the basement,
loosened the golden ring, and popped
the gummy seal. The bone-pale halves

slopped meekly into my bowl,
a bit soft, perhaps, and browning
at their fringes. The last person
to touch them was my mother.
She died in 1993. One year before
her death she held these pears
in her hand, peeled off their skin,
and drew a practiced edge down
their bellied-out middles to get at
their hearts. These — veins, strings,
and nut-like seeds — she sliced out too,
and threw into a pan to feed her hens,
then packed the pared halves into this jar.
Standing at her stove she showered
them with boiling water, then set on
the canning lid to let them slowly steam.
That cataclysm and ripening age teased
the sugar from each resisting molecule
of starch. And made them strangely
satisfying: a dish whose water has a memory
in this mostly dark house where
the last full night before the millennium
I have done nothing to prepare.