**The Strong Force**

My father had begun to suspect that things were no longer

what they seemed to be. This was not your garden-variety,

tinfoil-hat, alien-probe paranoia. Nor had his mind taken on

the protective coating of dementia, none of the Swiss-cheesing

of the brain that might have deflated him into dispassion.

If anything, his senses were now increasingly aware

of the ground becoming less firm beneath his feet, as if

one could no longer count on the quarks to link their tiny

hands and bind up all the empty spaces with chromodynamics

and baling wire. It was Death he saw coming, of course, close

enough now to hear the folds of the black cloak whispering

past him at night, smell the carrion on His breath.

This was not the abstraction against which he had stockpiled

faith for eighty years, testifying when he was younger that death

held no fear for him. Just yesterday, when we saw a junco

pulling at the decay of a fallen spruce, early light turning the orange

of the tree and the white-tipped tail feathers of the bird to fire,

he asked me how he could be expected to let any of it go,

to just move on, and I knew he meant that, whatever might be

ahead, it seemed incredible now, impossible to believe

it could ever atone for all he would soon leave behind.