

LAWRENCE RAAB

Restoration

Making something the way it was—
what could I have been thinking
months ago when I wrote that line
in my notebook? I liked the way the words
fit together, and perhaps it was well below zero
that morning, the furnace acting up again,

and I was feeling particularly mortal,
just a few weeks after the operation on my spine.
Yet how easily an occasion explains too much,
and how risky, how exacting is the work
of the surgeon, and of the great restorers—

each layer of varnish slowly disappearing
from another grimy masterpiece until the luminous
colors must be as they were when Turner
or Piero stepped back and nodded
in satisfaction. This is what they saw
is what I want to believe—the way the world
once was, even if no one can swear to it,

a thousand smart guesses having turned into choices—
what to remove, what to leave undisturbed.
The tiny smudge of a dog sleeping
far from the cross was there from the beginning.
But the vivid plume of smoke
above the crippled ship? Or the precise stare

of that angel? Should her eyes be so cold?
Should she really be looking at me
with such casual indifference, as if hundreds
of years ago I'd never have begged: Come down,
show me your face, make me whole again.