IRON LUNG

Andrew Smith

For Mark O' Brien

Every four and a half seconds the vacuum breathes me.
I never grew into my hands. I grew into a cavity
of motor functions, my brute tube, my bathyscope,
sounding the gluey air in this cheap flat.
Do you ever forget to breathe?
Do you ever place stones on your chest
to get your breathing closer to dreaming
breath? We're all under great pressure here,
I just feel it more. Breathing is a chore for the polio
boy, and like any daily chore, it calluses.
My skin is damp and albatross, like skin
in a tub too long. My body is nothing but a flipper.
So I am not a body, not a body except I sweat
puke and trickle and must be washed. No pleasure
even in this. You wash me like you'd rub
a coin. My mouth works and I write with it,
tongue on the sour bulb of the rod
that strikes the keys. Yes I write but
my portholes are lonely. You could reach in.
I've got one window and one watercolor
and bad food from bad help. I wonder
where the world went when it left me
to be pulsed by this clumsy hand
with its greasy palm and hard fingers.
I'm enclosed in a pulmonary gland,
a membranous sac with rivets from the forties.

An envelope you don't want to open.
My big machine is another god
invented by the playful god
who wanted company. It's a gas to them,
keeping me alive, child in a sleeve
with a head that wants everything
always. And my febrile skate down there,
skinny flank, it wants to sex you nurse.