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ECLIPSE ON THE DAY OF THE FIELD TRIP

There’d been an oversight in scheduling. Our class was sent out of the farmyard through a break in the lilacs and across the meadow to tour the town first. Here and there, groups of phlox stood in the grass and dandelions. Our line relaxed and bloomed into clusters.

When they spoke of the eclipse, how long until another comes, how long since . . . they seemed in second grade, or first—years younger than they were, and their guesses gamboled over the century, free-ranging and arbitrary, as if it were the field around us, unfenced and flat, uncut by curbs or posts or shrubs set at even intervals. When someone turned to face the sun deliberately—half dare and half in disbelief, his eyes aimed under it, then away—the sun was warm on our arms.

When the field ended and a cinder path sent us east, we began to feel colder and had quieted, our line more orderly and closed as we entered town. Women in long, plain dresses led us to the school where girls were given dress-length smocks to wear
over their t-shirts and shorts and the boys
were given vests. These were kept on
while they wrote letters with fountain pens

and posted them, while they made purchases
by the pound, got a shave, served time;
then, after the talk about telegrams

and party lines at the depot west of town,
the costumes were pulled off and given back
to the guides standing pathside to collect them.

Wearing only what they had chosen that morning
without much thought, the bright and sangled things
they had wanted once, they filed out of town,

guideless again, into the meadow, the class
of 2001. For what was there to touch
in the field, and break, to explain the use of

and the process of making it by hand?
It was near noon then, and colder. My skin was pebbled
and the light was lovely and the greens were lovely and wrong.

We ate under the shaded sky between the house
and barns, where in the rubbed-away ground,
hundreds of crescents lit the dirt and winked.

In the outbuildings, littered with simple machines,
periodically our guide allowed
one volunteer to operate a crank

as the rest of us watched. And the one
whose turn it was grew serious, and older then,
capable of a multitude of chores.