

AIDS Quilt

You said, casually, you'd seen it, had made
a panel for your brother, appliqued hearts
signed by those who knew him, hearts
because he was, you said, a tender, edgeless man.

You told how his panel was joined with others,
each three by six, the size of a grave, the quilt
opening up like a flag to fill the Mall
with thousands upon thousands of patches of color.

This was the 80's, before the meds, and so you told
what it was like at the hospital, where x-rays
made the invisible visible, where strangers' voices
explained how the body has its own necessity,

shutting down the least essential parts first,
the heart pounding iambs—survive, survive—
the bladder catheterized, the kidneys failing, the breath
laboring on. We cried then, on the street, in the cold,

because you watched him feel it all—life
rushing up at him then dropping away, as if he were
a frantic balloonist falling, the air rushing past
as he dropped every dead weight, saw each piece fall.