

Lost in the Crowd

as you grow older
my father said
or would have said
if he had not lost the power of speech

unable to swallow
he was fed through tubes
that by-passed the usual routes
liquid nutrients sped
like a presidential convoy
along roads closed to ordinary traffic

as you grow older
he would have said
things that are hidden from you
in your younger years
come out of the shadows
into the half light

the words were unspoken
but I could read them in his eyes
or would have done
if they had not been closed

now it's your turn
one of my children said
I could not tell which
having lost the power of moving my head

which one of you is speaking?

whether I spoke loudly enough to be heard
or for that matter spoke at all
I could not tell
there was no way of telling which faculty had failed
the faculty of speech
or the faculty of hearing

the problem of identifying the faulty part
like the problem of identifying the faulty bulb
in the fairy lights we used to hang
on our Christmas tree when I was a boy
was beyond me now

Hercules would have failed at it

failed at what?
someone said

I looked in vain for a sign
I would see a sign

I don't suppose you remember me
someone said
we were friends when we were children
someone told me you were dying

it was becoming difficult to tell them apart
they were so many
the collective noun for ghosts is
a proliferation
they spring up everywhere
like forget-me-nots beside the road
like bluebells in woodland
like trees

I saw then that it was my mother
who knew a lot about nature

I'm not your mother
someone said

I saw then that it was my friend
who knew all the wild flowers
by their proper names
cow parsley
herb robert
touch-me-not

are you dead too?
I asked him
or would have done
if he had not been lost in the crowd