

Bill's Elegy

You took your shirt off for the sun whenever you could,
proud of your strong back. In youth it bent for hours

picking hops in Kent, then in your prime humped bricks by day
and sacks of chips at night, kept both allotments going

so your old dad could satisfy his pride – and his was yours –
feeding the whole family. In between you learnt by heart

all thirty-two stanzas of Gray's Elegy, to satisfy your longing
for the poetry denied by a rough schooling, short on art.

You took your shirt off in the park that day, feeling good I think,
us together again, letting the warmth in, getting brown,

easing the ache from carrying those black thoughts too long
which briefly you put down. You tried to draw as well –

I only have the drawing that I made, the body-memory
of your solid back against my breast that night in bed

while you declaimed the whole of Gray's long protest poem,
making it your own. You were alive then. Not now. Dead.

At your funeral, you'll be pleased to know, your stropmy nephew
did what you had said: read the whole poem himself, all thirty-two.