

**Word Problem**

—for *Diane Glancy*

One hundred eighty thousand bison skulls  
are stacked into a mountain featured here,  
the caption reads, or so some archivists  
approximate—an educated shrug.  
This faded photo from 1870

blurs everywhere except the ghostly horns,  
and they are blank as photocopied tests  
a substitute hands out, each desk a sigh  
she cannot name. If prayer-dance returned  
the herd, if we peered resurrected furs

from our lookout on a cliff, would we count  
migration's steaming snouts across the snow  
and mark the mothers from their calves that strayed  
behind in search of clumps of onion grass?  
Or would sunset rifles smear the ice

so red again we'd drop down to our knees  
so not to slip, butchering by starlight,  
contented as the dapper merchant perched  
atop the pile, assured his grin is profit?  
The caption states the best market price

a ton of skulls might fetch was fifteen bucks.  
Most shipped to China where they were ground  
for fertilizer, though some were fashioned  
into cups. Teacher, I have a bellyache.  
Collect my test. You'll see I've left it blank.