The year before I became a stepmother, 
I climbed the levee stairs, fed 
the rest of my old self to the river. 
That green leviathan shot my clarity like gin. 

Impossible to imagine loving a man 
with children I don’t yet know, 
impossible to mother them 
through fathoms of the past, impossible 
to hear them calling me, 
by mistake, Mom. 

We struggle together with words, sounding 
them out, my stepson and I, perched 
on the bed like tightrope walkers. 
What words can help 

but those that make us smile, words like *narwhal* 
and *Jupiter*. He writes in a hand 

that reminds me of my own; his bantam words 
climb up the page. Words with hooves,
words with horns, words without vertigo.
I say an impossible prayer, to undo, to repair.

_Tell me how the story ends_, he says,
but I do not skip ahead.

I want to see, selfishly, the unfolding
of his face in age, in story.