SUNDAY IN NORTHUMBERLAND: TO THE ROCK

Sunday to the cairn in light rain, polished light
came down like a metal axe, whitening us,
then back to dark. Horrible hostess. Chatter,
chatter past the grotty house, the dirty buckets.
Afternoon biscuits. Quince paste burned on the AGA.
Tatty rubbish. Chatter, chatter.
                                   Riding clothes wrong,
wanting in cost & fancy. Snipe, snipe. Men ahead,
dog on elastic string leaping higher than the grass.

We walked to the strewn pile of robbed rocks
to sit beside it as if it was a reflecting pond.
Empty bone box in the stone pile, too small for a body
but for a baby's, or a bowl of burnt bone.
I'd touched a Bronze Age bowl the night before,
found in a tree's roots on the grounds of an estate.
Cists for the bones and holes for the bowls.
We walked the wet field, I said the word "practices"
aloud, then "excarnate" then "animal parts" then
"strange," "bizarre"—skulls, hoofs—down south,
a horse head joined to a sheep's jaw, a cow skull
with one inward-pointing horn, then "unity," "amalgam"
as we sidestepped puddles to the underworld,
walking up the hill past the World War II bunker.
Bones burned here, and elsewhere parts pegged together.
The bone of the father joined to the bone of a stranger.
Bone of the horse joined to the bone of the cow.
There I said the oldest words: werm, ash, fire,
bark, hand, black, flow, give, spit, we, this, hear.
I walked away from her chatter about the houses,
the women, the late hour, the rain, the dog running
into the army range where a sheep is sometimes vaporized.
Sang to myself to blot her out past the Roman camp,
now just lumps and squares, and then, finally

to the summit, to the boulder of cups with its bullaun full of rain.
We could not count the cups, them being connected
by deep troughs and natural chutes within the rock.
I swore I'd pour red water down the rock next time:
"It will look like a giant fire." I said, "Or like human brain."
A bloody rock, the mind of the tribe throbbing on the hill.
Fire ash I (chatter, chatter) werm dead what.