

SHOES

Howard Altmann

What is it about old shoes
that pulls a string or two—a gentle
puppeteer's tug between the eyes
and the heart—as if it were our
vital signs that were hanging
in the attic. Surely that torn pair
of faded blue jeans and tattered red
party dress will send us running back—
yet they don't walk right inside
the body the way an old pair of shoes
with their deepest wrinkles free
of dust paint the air with particles
of time. And I choose to understand
this now after all those shoes
in Washington were collected and
displayed, a rubble of lives exhumed,
shipped by plane over icy waters—
tagged and photographed and positioned
under the scrutiny of donated light—
lending torsos and limbs and hands
to the eyes and hearts that stopped
behind the double-sided museum glass.
And I choose to understand this now
after seeing the eyes of my father stop
behind the refracted pane, his concentration
uncamped by the curated heap,
his eighty year old vision now
a child's running through the mud—
every old man's shoes his father's and
every young girl's shoes his sister's—
and the past was never buried

or exhumed simply strung to a staged
presence, hanging like a heart
in its chambers that was blindly
beating life to death.