Ash Wednesday

They tell us we are made of dust, but I have faith
That I am a being of sunlight, ink, pollen, and steel.
My wings are no longer dyed a blinding white,
The last painted feathers now swirling to the floor
With a motion like leaves that have slipped through
The grasp of an ancient elm's bony fingers.

People step over them as if they are living things,
Delicate blossoms to avoid trampling underfoot,
But to me, they are already dead, poisoned by the bleach
I soaked them in every week for seventeen years.
My sneakers crush them into the carpet;
My forehead remains unmarked, untouched.

The others crowd around the copper-framed mirror,
Standing on tiptoe, finger-combing their hair,
Admiring the pristine brilliance of their wings.
I try in vain to discretely pluck a feather that
Stains my own with a single brushstroke of indigo
And refuses to be concealed by the folds of my gown.

No one notices anyway, not the feather,
Not the ungainly dance of my fingers across the piano,
Nearly losing their balance on the final chord.
No one can see that my lips remain motionless,
A half formed "we do" ricocheting across the back of my teeth
As my eyes fill with tears for all the wrong reasons.

I am drawn to gazes rather than ashen crosses,
Searching for the essence of what I had fabricated.
My expression does not reveal that I am equally baffled
By the natural hue of the wings folded across my back,
Not sure if they are a glorious bouquet, or a tangle of weeds
That I foolishly cultivated but should have destroyed.