

March

Who on earth would hope/for a new beginning
When the crusted snow/and the ice start thinning?
—Luci Shaw, *Under the Snowing*

The low cloud cover drifts as slowly
as windblown piles of snow.
This is the time
of earliest budding, like the first curds
that rise to the surface in a butter churn,
the time of the hard brown buds
of the willow oak, with its mauve samaras
spreading through the limbs like a low-grade fever.
Though cedar and pine
have held on to greenness relentlessly,
elm branches are empty;
racks of pecan and hickory
are dry sticks against a sky
cold and grey as tin.
Only the dogwood and the redbud
are flowering now, set deeply within
the deadened heart of the woods;
they are coals smoldering, about to touch
the dry kindling of trees—
fire in these flowers, fever in my veins
rising to touch the skin.
Though the fields are still covered by winter straw
rattling in the harsh wind,
tenacious seeds of a hope
thaw in the frozen stupor of the dirt.

—John P. Freeman