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Jonathan Swift at Work

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Imagine the man
Squinting along a table top,
Arranging some young girl’s toys,
Or tin soldiers,
Trying to get a perspective on things.

Or see him leaning back, back
To take in a steeple
Until his hat falls off

(Picking it up, he brushes
Its felt rim with the gentlest touch of his fingertips,
Getting the feel of it)

Or, dizzying, he actually falls backwards to the grass
Like they do in the silent movies.

Is the ringing in his ears
Menieres’
Coming on—
Madness feeling him out?

Did he wrap himself in thread,
Prick himself with needles,
Cover himself with sail cloth?

Imagine walking in on him:
“Research,” he intones.

How about dissecting lice,
Lying in the stable under a horse?

Did he, pausing from his essay on the English language,
Spout gibberish?
Did he linger in the jakes,
Taking it all in?
He must have looked through
Both ends of his pocket perspective,
Climbed stairs,
Placed himself at odd angles,

Emptied his pockets,
Sniffed young ladies and old women,
Staring embarrassingly at their breasts.

Did he have a collection of peculiarities
In a hidden drawer—
Cuttings of hair
Fingernails
Bees knees
Tokens
Mouse pelts
An extracted molar?

See him stomping about
The green like a giant,
Creeping along walls
Lilliput-style,

Winnying back at the horse he was brushing
Yelling from bridges and whispering into corners.

He’s not Gulliver, we remember,
But he made him,
Imaging him into life.