

## ENCYCLOPÆDIA BRITANNICA

We were as excited as when we'd bought our new car,  
and it, too, weighed a ton, the entire history  
of the world and everything in it  
on two whole shelves in our family room,  
sitting like a judge over our new color TV.

We fact-checked over dinner  
to settle arguments erupting like Etna (Volume 8)  
while the Caesar salad was being served.  
In which movie does Charlie Chaplin eat a stewed shoe?  
What was the exact date of Kristallnacht?  
Before we had our Encyclopædia Britannica,  
everybody had opinions instead of facts,  
which they stuck to, uncorrected, unto death.

But you couldn't pick a fight with the Encyclopædia  
Britannica.  
Even saying its name upped my I.Q.  
It was written by Einsteins, by presidents  
and professors—people brainier than anybody  
in my house, on my street, in my town—  
experts—unlike my mother,  
who never finished high school.

Its index of topics was a book in itself.  
"The History of the Persian Empire."  
"The Nine Planets in our Solar System."  
"The Anatomy of the Polar Bear."  
One day, in high school, I looked up my name  
and wrote a report on the "other" Jane Shore  
(1445-1527), the mistress of King Edward IV (Volume 20).  
If my parents had had the Encyclopædia Britannica  
when they were deciding what to name me,  
would I have been a Jennifer  
instead of the penitent mistress of a king  
made to walk the streets of London, barefoot?

Now, over half a century old, it resides  
in a climate-controlled storage unit on River Road,  
in the cartons I packed after my parents died:  
its bulging knowledge forever leashed together  
between covers, warped and moldering,  
its defunct contributors bulldozed under  
for eternity, as in a family graveyard—  
its shahs replaced with ayatollahs,  
Pluto demoted to a dwarf planet,  
its endangered animals now extinct.

—Jane Shore