

Red Cardigan

(acquired by the museum in 1937)

So long you've been waiting, demure behind glass,
silent and sanitised, slightly stand-offish,
a thing of great beauty, an anomaly, a mystery,

the rarest of birds. And we are the birders
flocking to gape at you – red cardinal? tanager?
crimson finch? – looking for answers.

What can you tell us, so buttoned-up, so tight-lipped?
What are you holding close to your chest? Tell us
who made you, who chose to stand up and be counted –

knitting with wool bright as blood, in stitches
still new to the world. If we stood in beside you
what would we smell – eau de cologne, or turf smoke

and oil, like the whiff off the garments around you,
geansais for farmers and fishermen, indigo blue, or plain
white the way the wool came straight from the sheep?

How much did they pay to have the fleece dyed,
and then spun? Was it a lady from Dublin come to see
how you lived? Had she heard tell of 'the stitches'?

Was it she chose the rich colour, or was it the woman
who knit you, dreaming of a cardigan for a red letter day,
or for the scarlet woman she secretly was? My mother

had a phrase for frivolous things without purpose,
Put it in a glass case and throw sugar at it, she'd say.
You have never been worn, except behind glass, by

a dummy, a mannequin. So are you without purpose?
Or a thing of great beauty, the rarest of birds.

Geraldine Mitchell