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What Chemistry Means to Me

John Dalton counted atoms by the pinch
when fire was slippery and stone became ash.
The Middle Ages, previously, had dried up too fast.

Dalton persisted in sampling vintages of isotopes
some of which glittered. These and more
would become the basis, I guess, of the Law of Excess?

Dalton overturned a terminology involving the gods,
and without his discovery, was it?
of the Law of Multiple Proportions?
carbon would still be dumped down coal holes
in heaps in people's basements.

Progress in chemistry, it is true, made the 19th century grittier
than it needed to be
and chemistry textbooks bulkier in the 20th.

I thought of Dalton and Mr. Anderson, my chemistry teacher,
who shook my hand the day I quit high school,
as I wondered what I would tell my parents
though confident I knew
what I would always know about chemistry.