Poem Written at Dawn for Frank Paluka

Norman Dubie
A desk before a window.

A prism sits in its willow frame. Beside it
Are two yellowed postcards, a pencil and stick-matches.
Light passes through the prism, breaking down
Into colors that are steady: there's green,
Violet and yellow. Outside everything is thawing,
And deep in the woods crocus and skunk cabbage
Are growing from the center of actual slabs
Of color:
The open, black and indigo sides of deer, breaking down,
A cadaver of deer everywhere!
(Much of two herds starved in the last snow.)

But there are the two postcards on the desk.
One is filled with
The bright conical flowers of a painting by Redon.
The other, much older, I have
Looked at since I was a boy: it shows

Five bathers beside the river Neva, they are old men
And large with mottled stomachs that droop
Like the blonde nests of Osprey-hens.
These men are out at daybreak, all around them
Russia is waking; with axes they have chopped
Through the ice and three of them are entering
The river for their swim, the other two just
Now are stepping from the water, and it's
These two who are
Amazing: they are chilled, transparent,
With here and there a swirl of blue, they are like
Crystals of amethyst which a light
Is passing through, the light falling broadly
Into reds and dark yellows all along
The snow on the riverbank, colors like in that corner
Of the room with flowers that Redon painted, tropical
And new. But these bathers,

These nude figures, three stepping down,
The other two ascending like in a judgement, they don't
Belong to Redon's painting. But to a dark mural
That is cruel and medieval. Things change!

Light passes through this prism in its willow frame.
There are stick-matches. A pencil.
Winter insists on detail. Things change.