



THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN¹

—LYNNE KNIGHT

When Rodin first felt the looseness
of the white Dominican robe Balzac wore
to write in, his hands went still in the clay.

He stood for a long while, learning
the cloth's heavy fall, letting it find its way
to Balzac's hands, which would hold the robe

closed from within, simplifying the figure
until nothing human would be noticed but
the head in its defiance of a bronze repose.

Months later, when the Salon scorned—
obese monstrosity; colossal foetus—
Rodin stood in the recess of his studio

embracing one of the maquettes,
feeling all the way back to the heat
of hands in the clay, his own,

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Southern Humanities Review.



Balzac's. At the time of his death,
Balzac's body was a ruin, according
to the Goncourts a belly with a profile

like the ace of spades, though he was
only fifty-one. Yet nothing like kindness
led Rodin to drape the figure. It wasn't

about hiding the ugly sausages of torso,
arms and legs. He needed a man impatient
for great motion—dressed loosely,

striding from the scene.

Lynne Knight is the author of six full-length poetry collections, and of six chapbooks. Her work has appeared in many journals, including *Poetry* and *Southern Review*. Her awards and honors include publication in *Best American Poetry*, a *Prix de l'Alliance Française*, a PSA Lucille Medwick Memorial Award, a *RATTLE* Poetry Prize, and an NEA grant. *I Know (Je sais)*, her translation with the author Ito Naga of his *Je sais*, appeared in 2013. She lives on Vancouver Island.