The Game of Life

Robin Chapman
rschapman@wisc.edu

Not the children’s game of chutes and ladders
but the mathematician’s toy of rules and repetition,
model of a world whose cells will toddle through
successive states of on and off, life and death, evolve
into the steady states of blocks or beehives, boats,
or blink endlessly in patterns we name beacons,
pulsars, toads—or else the future zips across
our screen like spaceships passing—
giders, glider guns,

unless it all blinks off.
The game a matter of John Conway’s simple rules:
your neighborhood a grid of three by three,
you a cell who can be born
if exactly three neighbors already live;
if fewer than two exist, you die
of loneliness; if more than three, you die
of overcrowding, event repeated across the board—
birth and death,

but no love or mourning,
no gold-winged warblers moving through the rain,
no redbud bursting its bark to flower, no wild leeks
simmering, no way to knock on a stranger’s door.