

CHRISTOPHER CUNNINGHAM

*The Poem to Its Reader*

So you're sitting there, and out of the corner  
of your ear, you hear me murmuring,  
but maybe you're not really listening,  
because you're thinking about dinner

and whether to get take-out—maybe Kung Pao  
chicken and wonton soup—or to nuke spaghetti  
and meatballs, or when your latte will be ready,  
or how many pages you have to go

in this book, and you flip to the back  
and do some subtraction—I'm still there,  
tugging at your sleeve, muttering in your ear—  
or maybe you're distracted

by the woman, young, red-haired, well-dressed,  
who looks up and catches you staring at her  
nose, her look saying, *Is something the matter?*  
and you look down at your book, embarrassed—

but I'm right here waiting, poised  
to take flight in figure: my words  
launch from the page, enunciated like blackbirds  
against the blue sky, their noisy

forms articulate—my words, that is—crowing  
brightly in loose formations and swooping curves  
(Petrarchan rhyme and slanting verbs),  
and your head is full of me without knowing

how it came to be so. When the end is near,  
I slip into a whisper, furling the illusion  
of me. Like a *trompe l'oeil* that's been ironed, confused  
with its wall, like the candlestick that disappears

into a kiss in a textbook picture of figure  
and ground, my similes lose their shape,  
unraveling, metaphors mixing like paint.  
And then, like sound slipping through your fingers,

I'm gone, without an echo—purest sign of absence—  
and you hear no thing, an impermanence  
of rhyming abstractions without semblance  
of being, and you're left holding paper, and ink, and silence.