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

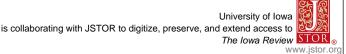
in this book, and you flip to the back and do some subtraction—I'm still there, tugging at your sleeve, muttering in your ear or maybe you're distracted

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.