

The oaths streaming down.
The terrace emptying out.
The *Alla aqbar* of the muezzin
Calling the faithful.
The minarets, the hot sun, the white city.
My lips full of fear and prayer.
My heart full of nonsense,
Never as young, and the sea,
The blue sea in the distance,
The cold, unimplicated sea.

BEETHOVEN: SONATA NO. 14

for Roma

You were at the piano playing the “Moonlight,”
A name Rellstab gave it when he heard
The Adagio, and remembered moonlight
Flecking the waves of Lake Lucerne.
But this was afternoon, in Boston,
The sun lighting up your apartment
Like a flare, your fingers laboring
Against a dead middle-C, and an A
Which twanged in its several pitches.
But it was Beethoven nonetheless,
Surviving the accidents of time
And circumstance, even the unlikely name.
Outside, three floors below,
The Asian children—Vietnamese, Cambodian?—
Recently arrived like the last of so many
Witnesses, were playing among themselves,
Squealing in their small voices to the ends
Of the street. You’d said you’d seen them
In winter, the girls in sun dresses and sandals,
The boys in short-sleeved shirts, as though
Their parents knew no changes of season,

As though one abyss, for them, were like another.
It's what we'd talked about the night before:
Privation, loss: how art, for instance,
Rises out or in spite of it, Beethoven
Tuning a deaf ear to the world, giving it back
Its notion of symphony, or Austen,
Locked at Chawton into spinsterhood and illness,
Retrieving for us from the eden of romance
A truer vision: love hard-won and difficult.
Art for life's sake we'd said: ours,
If not their own. But for the moment
We were happy as you kept on playing
Into the Minuet, a flower, Liszt had called it,
Between two voids. Always that nothingness
Which gives substance its joy, its generous
Presence. I remembered then my father
Visiting us on Sunday afternoons
And playing the same passages, the ice
Clinking in his Scotch as he tripped his way
To the end, his fingers never wholly accurate,
And I lingering by his side, glad enough
For all his false starts, all the repeats
Which kept him with us that much longer.
Such were the terms: each note became
A benediction and an elegy as well.
And as you slid into the Presto, that final
Whirlwind, I imagined myself among them,
The children below us, crouching to their size,
With them almost in body if not spirit,
And only for the sake of being there
When, for the first time, they could hear
Beethoven's music falling down to them
From a third-floor window.
What could they have remembered,
Their faces turning upward, the arms
Stilled to their sides,
As the frenetic, ascending scales exploded
Into the sforzando chords?

Some insistent image they'd kept back?
Moonlight on waves on a lake?
The darkness which makes that possible?