

BRUCE BOND

*Madam Zero*

Who can say what the silence said  
to Madam Zero—that's what the other  
patients called her—*I am dead,*  
she claimed, *and yet I live forever.*

*Live*, the way a fugitive lives  
in a strange land, the mother tongue  
a childhood music that leaves  
a little more each night, each dawn.

And what could touch her, I ask,  
she who lay like black on black  
water, what pried her from the lake  
of her bed, peeled her like a mask.

She saw her image everywhere  
as the thing that was missing,  
the eye in the stone, the sleeper's stare,  
the clock's dice clicking in its fist.

She was the hunger of the cloud  
that breaks on the darkened ocean,  
the surge that cannot be consoled,  
that cannot slip the shore it's in.

Doubtless I too would have shied  
away, glanced down at my breakfast  
in fear, in shame. Who am I  
to cross her, to wake a night like this.

And yet, here, tonight, as I think  
of a mother in her madness  
alone, how she hovers on the brink  
of no place, it's true, how Madam

Zero put it, that the living die  
into a life where it's hard for us  
to call them, where the long dry  
valley gathers up its branches,

where the mother stares at a bedside  
photo slow to name the faces  
looking back, each bright figure iced  
where it stands in a still glaze

of unremembered joy: a slice,  
if you will, beyond death's peace  
or the fog of breathing, pressed  
beneath the heaven of the glass.