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.

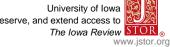
And what could touch her, I ask, she who lay like black on black water, what pried her from the lake of her bed, peeled her like a mask.

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.