

Girl Writing a Letter · *William Carpenter*

A thief drives to the museum in his black van. The night watchman says Sorry, closed, you have to come back tomorrow. The thief sticks the point of his knife in the guard's ear. I haven't got all evening, he says, I need some art. Art is for pleasure, the guard says, not possession, you can't something, and then the duct tape is going across his mouth. Don't worry, the thief says, we're both on the same side. He finds the Dutch Masters and goes right for a Vermeer: "Girl Writing a Letter." The thief knows what he's doing. He has a Ph.D. He slices the canvas on one edge from the shelf holding the salad bowls right down to the square of sunlight on the black and white checked floor. The girl doesn't hear this, she's too absorbed in writing her letter, she doesn't notice him until too late. He's in the picture. He's already seated at the harpsichord. He's playing the G Minor Sonata by Domenico Scarlatti, which once made her heart beat till it passed the harpsichord and raced ahead and waited for the music to catch up. She's worked on this letter for three hundred and twenty years. Now a man's here, and though he's dressed in some weird clothes, he's playing the harpsichord for her, for her alone, there's no one else alive in the museum. The man she was writing to is dead—time to stop thinking about him—the artist who painted her is dead. She should be dead herself, only she has an ear for music and a heart that's running up the staircase of the Gardner Museum with a man she's only known for a few minutes, but it's true, it feels like her whole life. So when the thief hands her the knife and says *you* slice the paintings out of their frames, you roll them up, she does it; when he says you put another strip of duct tape over the guard's mouth so he'll stop talking about aesthetics, she tapes him, and when the thief puts her behind the wheel and says, drive, baby, the night is ours, it is the Girl Writing a Letter who steers the black van on to the westbound ramp for Storrow Drive

and then to the Mass Pike, it's the Girl Writing a Letter who drives eighty miles an hour headed west into a country that's not even discovered yet, with a known criminal, a van full of old masters and nowhere to go but down, but for the Girl Writing a Letter these things don't matter, she's got a beer in her free hand, she's on the road, she's real and she's in love.