

## Life Altar

In the cafeteria's dead light,  
there was an opportunity to write  
a dedication to an ancestor, or  
leave a photograph. Munching on pita  
from the event spread, wondering  
what to write, I found a turquoise marker  
in the pencil box, made a blue patch  
in the notecard's center, I wrote *This*  
*is almost my mother's favorite color,*

the patch, the letters failing to flood  
with those aquamarines glinting  
from her ears, her impulses for cobalt  
glass vases, sheets like waves, three bathroom walls  
in blue flaring sky and petrifying it:  
we lived in that color, a blue that tries  
and fails into the cafeteria,  
in through my attempt at truth, the window.

Weeks before, my mother and I stood  
in an art museum parking lot. It was  
barely spring. The train horn articulated  
an atmosphere. Crows flitted like ash,  
collected themselves onto powerlines  
and took up again, leaving us. She started  
crying a little, handing me a carved  
stone, turquoise from her recent trip. *You*  
*are the best thing that has happened to me,*  
she said, her eyes turning pink. I felt stupid.  
I didn't know what to say at all.

I laid my notecard at the Virgin's feet. I hoped  
no one would think I was trying to be funny.

## On Speaking

Out in that mouth-open din  
where neighbors shuffle buckets  
in cold rain, the cat slips out  
through fence posts, files its body  
through unswept corners. He follows  
rats plaguing one neighbor's  
backyard, encircles and scruffs one  
presumes nothing in the rat  
can hurt, and growing bored with this  
playtoken, he continues in the low  
early lamplight thrown into corridors,  
appears upon a windowsill  
where, on the other side, a woman  
wears her red sweater (it is  
almost Christmas) / she stirs at the stove  
while a man in the doorway watches  
the back of her neck, thinks, watching her,  
how he has loved her so long, knowing  
those mornings tossing through her hair,  
their tomato vines cultivated  
on fire escapes, night lengthening  
itself just for them, their speech, their  
bodies rippling in bed, and yet  
the gaps between him and this life  
announce and re-announce themselves  
outside this kitchen / as when  
this dark wind passes over his lip,  
or at sunup, pedestrians  
caught in current towards the train, or  
when the cat walks in the world, a rain,  
the weather's low throat, the door  
too small for the man, for the woman  
standing in their well-lit kitchen.  
He asks her something like

if this is all life can be,  
red sweaters and interiors,  
and she asks what he means, if  
he is, in fact, unsatisfied,  
if this dinner, gurgling  
around her spoon is not enough,  
and they warble in formless syllables,  
passing and dying by each other /  
the cat, the brief light cast over  
its damp, simple face, exits  
the light thrown over this  
the world's small-boned square.