

GARY J. WHITEHEAD

Music from a Farther Room

The flute, the sackbut, the dulcimer
in the rooms of the dying. The harp,
the cornet, the psaltery. The look

of the eyes' last seeing when the ears
hear their final note or chord. The flats
some know as sharps. A bee batting a screen.

Thales of Crete appeased the wrath
of Apollo with paeans to end a plague,
and in all of Sparta's rooms,

close with death, that conclusive music.
But meadowlarks, too. Finches. Thrushes
in the distant woods. Birds which are

themselves flutes, sackbuts, dulcimers
dressed in feathers. Up in Amherst
Emily's last breath of the bobolink's

virtuosic bubbling. A mother's cooing,
half weeping, half exalted send-off
heard beyond a locked door. Anywhere

and often. In Pittsburgh the shrill whistle
of the steel mill; how many have ridden
that held note into infinity? In Treblinka

the shrill whistling trains, the chuff,
the cough, the high-note wail.
On the Oregon Trail the pioneer's wheel.

The ship's whistle for the immigrant
whose filmed eyes never did see Ellis Island.
The fading brain takes what it's offered.

My mother's mother, no instrument
but the clock ticking, the ice clinking
its melt in a bedside tumbler.

O, don't we each have our deaths set
to music? Natural or manmade. The tabla,
the tabor, the steam calliope.

Mozart's "Moonlight Sonata" playing
tinny through headphones stuck
in someone else's busy ears. C# minor.

What do we hear there at the edge,
the threshold, the dark verge,
when sense, no more than a warm room,

echoes empty? How must the bedside
cello sound, how the car horn, how
the human voice hushing us at the last.

If not so much the tension of the song
resolved, at least let it be the force
of the crossing when the humming ceases.