

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.

Beethoven'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 emptily? 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.