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Madam Zero

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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.