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
captured 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.