

JESSE FERGUSON

Whose Song Preceded Silence

No longer a battered panache above snow . . .

It would have been outside.

It was not from the vast ventriloquism

Of sleep's faded papier-mâché . . .

—Wallace Stevens, "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself"

At the earliest minute of morning,
the jury still out on the toehold of dawn,
I sat banqueting with high school friends,
faces playing musical chairs
in a silent hall. Faces clear as watermarks
blooming in basement-boxed photographs, as though
their familiar outlines had stepped into peripheral vision
and taken a seat. I drew closer to their table, sat drawing blanks
as the sun with its foot in the door of my window,
no longer a battered panache above snow,

stepped lightly on the crust of what I knew
could not be, as my cousin and I had stepped on
untrodden wastes of white fields, trying to leave
no trace, testing if the world would bear our weight.
Next, my cousin (my dead cousin, Cory) knocked on the door
of that peopled hall, seemingly unaware he'd died.
Stepped in and dropped his scuffed guitar case
on the featureless floor, turning his thumb-smudge
of a face to mine. But just then, daybreak's first beak snapped wide
(it would have been outside,

but felt closer) and through a draft-crack that scrawny cry,
like a bird's, found the ear not pressed to the pillow
and entering that open door nearly slammed another
on my more-than-dreamed cousin
who was just then showing us his open palms, his clean shirt.
Determined to stay, I ate on, and before we'd risen
he rose and unsnapped his case, removing
a steel slide guitar that flashed bright as glare from hoods
of oncoming traffic, bright as castings from the ego's prism.
It was not from the vast ventriloquism

of memory that his hands pumped music
to flood the far corners of the steadily emptying hall.
It was not from the selfish mix tapes of grief
that he stole the inspiration animating his homemade
bottleneck slide, a dove in flight
above snares of taut steel strings. Slowly he played
but one song: a bluegrass arrangement that made
a temple of the empty hall and wake-proof relics
of his pasty hands, leaving me something to take away
of sleep's faded papier-mâché.