

El Día de Los Muertos

It is not Halloween, it is November 1959,
and in Mexico City someone
has given my mother a sugar skull
enfleshed and candied with her name.
Except her name is Irish, Clare,
so they have been calling her Luz
for light. They don't call her Clara
and I never find out why, because
the first time I hear this story
I am eight, in the kitchen, fingering
my costume's pearly mask
and not caring enough to wonder,
and thirty years later she's half-lost to me
behind the coarse curtains and forced heat
of assisted living. But each time it is
somehow easy to receive her,
radiant, lit from below by the sweetness
of death, skin a powdered tint
in black and white but almost going
orange, as in the photograph I have
of her lifting her clasped hands over
her head, '58, knot of hair and smile
both sober, just askew, in Boston
the year before she meets my father
and leaves him for Mexico City, *Cielito*
Lindo maybe, certain at last she's made
a clean escape. My eighth Halloween
has her stirring something in the kitchen,
sauce red and heavy with the telling,
while miles away he sits in his lab's bruised blue
signing papers, working late, keeping off
from old stories, capes and crowns, wild knocking,
bones at the door.

 In the next day
that I give to her story on nights
when I need more, sun opens like a stained hand
under Spanish graves. My mother lays down
a rug, Oaxacan wool, Zapotec yarn
spun with birds and stars. She kneels

Kestrel

on the wool on the grass
over the dead who are not her dead
in a body that can't feel it will ever know
the beginning or end of another
body. Scared, hungry, she lifts the heavy head
frosted with blue roses at the brows
drifting on a hive of sky-white crystals
thrumming with her name. She lifts it
and I take and eat that light
that was my mother, once, and only is
my dark, delicious guess at what remains.