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 pearled 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.