

Next Door

Robbie Gross is dribbling, then fakes a shot, then takes it, the metronome of his solo practice an accompaniment so persistently tapping its foot in my days that, 4 a.m., forty years later, hearing a basketball *tock* on the sidewalk below my window, I am returned to my first room, separated by a mulberry tree and hedges from where Robbie Gross is dribbling, then fakes a shot, then takes it, the metronome so persistently tapping its foot in my days that I knew we were keeping time but what song was it during games with our older brothers and after they left, shooting by himself, like the tree alone falling, morning and long afternoon, through my books, through all my ages—what song? I broke the court's code and deciphered the slow dribble's: *I'll Wait*. while the shooter sized up the competition or focused his solitary mind, and then the bomb-fuse *ticktickticktick* while he fainted right, moved left, setting up the shot and the listener (not trying to listen) and then the blank space of the arcing quiet as he shoots. That silence is also like the space between the reader and the page, the little nation between the writer's words and our particular way of receiving them, or the blank station we fill in between ourselves and passing strangers, or between ourselves and people we presume to know, but most achingly in the ones we try to know. Then came my guess whether the shot went in, hit the rim or bounced off the garage, because I had the misfortune of growing up next-door friends with the pudgy Rob Gross who became the most handsome Robbie, growing taut

and sly for having played from the outside line for so long
and by his last June when the beautiful Margie Harmelin
rode over from her neighborhood and lay her bicycle
on its side before they both went indoors, by then
he only caught my eye with reticence, a muffled kindness
passing to me from under his shaggy bangs,
nearly embarrassed for me, as I now understand it,
because he was bluff enough to know what he had become
to any young woman, and what I was becoming in my
blank space, my window, like this one from which I just
heard Robbie Gross take a shot, from which I just
dreamed hearing the song the world called “Don’t. Wait.”