Richard Cecil

The Interrupted Nap

Central air recirculates the room
raising little hairs along my arms
exactly as they rise when, almost asleep,
alone, I stroke them with my fingertips.
I'm so accustomed to touching you at night
that in this dark I've made at noon with drapes
drawn against the terrible August sun,
I automatically reach for something smooth,
skinlike: the velvet chairback, the cat, my wrist.

I run my nails along the lines of veins
as lightly as the manufactured wind
runs along the surfaces of this room,
cooling them. I close my eyes. I shiver.
I sink down into the sofa's cushions
like a diver in a deep-sea bell:
outside, savage atmospheres: inside,
the delicate networks of blood and nerves; between,
thin walls of steel, of glass, of skin.

I remember almost drowning. In early evening,
blinding sunset reflected in the pool,
I dove incautiously into the shallow end
and dashed my head against the concrete rim.
I could have breached the surface with my hand,
but so cool and dark and absolutely quiet
the bottom seemed, I knew that I was miles
below my playmates' faces peering down.
When the lifeguard fished me with her hook,

I rose by the stretched elastic of my trunks
into the noise and heat and light, amazed,
for I thought that I had slipped all nets.
When she firmly pressed her lips to mine
to force her breath into my emptied chest,
I fought. I clamped my teeth so desperately
she had to prize them open with a stick.
Oxygen burned like acid in my lungs.
Next day, I bragged about my first French kiss.

At six, I didn't want to owe my life.
But thirty years later, waiting for you
in the artificial dark, I forgive her
harsh resuscitation. She couldn't know
how pleasantly my shroud of water wrapped me,
how snug my coffin of endless sleep, how often,
abandoned for an afternoon, nothing
half as pleasant as almost drowning happens,
until you shove the door against its jamb,

pouring heat and light and noise inside.
And I don't criticize your rough embrace.
We lucky divers always wake to violence,
tons of gravity hurled down on us, furious
congratulations shouted in our ears.
Silence is the consolation of the lost.
Self-sufficiency. They've cut the line by which
anyone could haul them in. I envy them.
Then I envy no one, waking in your arms.