

## **Girl Writing a Letter**

Bill Carpenter

("stanza" and line splits added for easier memorization)

A thief drives to the museum in his black van. The night  
watchman says Sorry, closed, you have to come back tomorrow.

The thief sticks the point of his knife in the guard's ear.  
I haven't got all evening, he says, I need some art.

Art is for pleasure, the guard says, not possession, you can't  
something, and then the duct tape is going across his mouth.

Don't worry, the thief says, we're both on the same side.  
He finds the Dutch Masters and goes right for a Vermeer:  
"Girl Writing a Letter." The thief knows what he's doing.

He has a Ph.D. He slices the canvas on one edge from  
the shelf holding the salad bowls right down to the  
square of sunlight on the black and white checked floor.

The girl doesn't hear this, she's too absorbed in writing  
her letter, she doesn't notice him until too late. He's  
in the picture. He's already seated at the harpsichord.

He's playing the G Minor Sonata by Domenico Scarlatti,  
which once made her heart beat till it passed the harpsichord  
and raced ahead and waited for the music to catch up.

She's worked on this letter for three hundred and twenty years.  
Now a man's here, and though he's dressed in some weird clothes,  
he's playing the harpsichord for her, for her alone, there's no one  
else alive in the museum.

The man she was writing to is dead—  
time to stop thinking about him—the artist who painted her is dead  
She should be dead herself, only she has an ear for music  
and a heart that's running up the staircase of the Gardner Museum  
with a man she's only known for a few minutes, but it's  
true, it feels like her whole life.

So when the thief  
hands her the knife and says you slice the paintings out  
of their frames, you roll them up, she does it; when he says  
you put another strip of duct tape over the guards mouth  
so he'll stop talking about aesthetics, she tapes him,

and when  
the thief puts her behind the wheel and says, drive, baby,  
the night is ours, it is the Girl Writing a Letter who steers  
the black van on to the westbound ramp for Storrow Drive  
and then to the Mass Pike,

it's the Girl Writing a Letter who  
drives eighty miles an hour headed west into a country  
that's not even discovered yet, with a known criminal, a van  
full of old masters and nowhere to go but down,

but for the  
Girl Writing a Letter these things don't matter, she's got a beer  
in her free hand, she's on the road, she's real and she's in love.