

Orpheus' Flute

So many moments pass,
so many timbres, shadings
muted or dissolved. How crass
despair for not hearing them,
for parting the braiding
passages so stiffly. When
you were born I didn't celebrate enough.

So songful are your cheeks,
so perfectly composed your minting
eye, a bright beak's
laughter playing even then
I swear, though I was mute and stinting
like a cloven stick. When
you were born I didn't celebrate enough.

Mysterious flute, did you come
as she came? Death took Orpheus' mistress,
and the sweet gods pitied him, wailing, numb
with grief. The lacquer-billed
egret's bone for his distress
they hollowed, stopped. He filled
even hell with praise.

—Keith Henderson