**At the Arts Conservatory**

Joseph Mills

Music comes from practice rooms

a piano sonata, a cello being bowed,

scales on a clarinet.

Dancers slide out of studios

bend at the drinking fountain,

go to the bathrooms, check phones.

The hall smells of sweat,

detergent, the latex paint

institutions use on cinder block.

I’m here to lead a poetry workshop,

but for now, I fold against a wall

in a way that doesn’t hurt my back,

and thumb through messages.

In a hospice room in Brittany,

my father-in-law is dying of cancer.

The doctor says when the pain comes

that will be a signal. The signal.

Through a doorway

I can see bandaged ankles,

knee braces, thigh wraps.

Dancers balance and jump

on calloused, scarred feet.

They are young and beautiful

and already know a great deal

about pain. The musicians do too,

talking with familiarity

about repetitive stress injuries.

And they too may know someone

who is dying at this very moment,

perhaps nearby, perhaps far away.

I silence my phone,

and step into a studio,

crossing the threshold

that clears away concerns

at least temporarily.

This is what art making is,

a momentary amnesia,

a pausing, and perhaps,

that’s all it is because the signal

will come for the people we love,

for all of us, and nothing we do,

not writing or dancing or singing,

will stop it or change it.

The students look at me, curious

as to why I am there

and what we are going to do

in our time together.

A moment ago, I thought I knew.

I planned a lesson, one I’ve used

many times before, but, suddenly

I consider telling them

how I used to bring my daughter

to the school to watch dances

and afterwards she would choreograph

her own, each time ending stretched out

on the floor with her eyes closed,

and I think about telling them

my father-in-law lives in *Finisterre*,

which means the end of the earth,

a name and phrase I’ve always loved,

and I wonder if I should tell them

how out there in the hallway,

I suddenly remembered my grandfather

building a seawall. A hard man,

more comfortable with tools than children,

he kept grumbling for us to get out of the way

then, once he had finished, he lined us up

to write our names in the wet cement.

The students watch and wait,

and I find myself saying something

neither in my notes or my memory.

*I’m going to start by reading some poems,*

*and I want you to see if you can tell*

*which ones* *are by people still alive*

*and which by those long since dead.*

Some students look worried,

some lean forward.