1. Now is the time for nuance, probing for subtext. She recalls he once used the word “standstill” in a letter and she puzzled for days at the cruel expression of his apathy. That was before the ill-advised wedding, before the feckless ocean crossing, when boredom and close quarters sapped all compassion. Now she reads the latest missive for misgivings, the subtle irony of regret, knowing of course he will never come clean.

2. One day there’s hell to pay: simple fact of anyone’s life. The foundation seems solid enough. Four walls, a good roof, the furnishings that make for comfort and ease. But furnishings are also trappings, and one day you wake up trapped, whichever way you turn. Tick, tick, tock. Long ago you colored at the kitchen table while Daddy finished off the whiskey dregs. “Son,” he said. “You work, you drink, you die. One day there’s hell to pay.
That's all the wisdom your old pop’s
got for you.” You answered him
the way you were taught: “Yes, sir.”
And today, five years older than he was then,
you still don’t have a better answer.
You stand in the backyard
as the day goes dark thinking yes, sir,
one day there’s hell to pay.

3.
His habit: watching the sea
for hours. No real purpose in it,
just what he must do.
Water. Light. The smell of salt.
The warpage of the porch,
planks absorbing moisture.
It’s all about time, the tide
sneaking up, falling back,
shadows in motion,
the day’s long journey
passing him by.

4.
Morning after a restless night.
The window admits harsh light,
and he is glad for the brutal glare,
the way each object declares itself
when lit up. Chair, book, bedclothes.
The world of bad dreams
temporarily banished,
a reassurance that this—not that
nightmare world—is reality.
All right, he tells himself, all right.
That’s over for now and I’m still here.

5.
The moment of recognition:
this is the place she cannot escape.
Not even walking through the door
would do the trick, a false threshold.
Light pours uninvited into the room,
cold and daunting, her nakedness exposed.
Shadows are implacable, the books
Drought-stricken trees beyond the pane,
beyond her ken. Well into dotage,
her grandmother had a habit of saying,
“I’m in fine whack, praise God,”
But no such lie will serve, not now, not here,
entrapped as she is, nothing to stave
off the worst of it, the light, these walls.

6.
Dark windows
reveal nothing
of the life inside.
Light can bestow
dimension—
or steal it.
Sudden
luminosity.

7.
It was not the evening of choice,
the theater with its smoky laughter
and maudlin tears.
The particolored curtain
chattering about free fall,
the subtext inscrutable.
The bogus dialogue
that charms bluestockings.
How they pore over
the program in search
of spiritual direction
or gossip or fashion advice.
A moment of darkness
relieves the gloom—
and then limelight
and blare and sulfur—
the pangs intensified,
the rabble uproarious.

8.
In the office
all is official,
files of light
cut corners
angular and true.
Each object holding
and withholding
the magic moment.
Scissors, paste,
typewriter. Above all
the telephone’s insistent bell
with the power to summon him
to its court, no recourse.
Is there no way out,
is there no way —
the thought returns
and is again cut short,
filed away. Just like that
another day has fled.

9.
This is the room where hard sunlight
stakes its claim and darkens moods.
This is the book that confounds diligence.
Hard to read with the page so bright
and the air so still. This is the floor
that will not bear weight. Idly pull
a loose thread and now the plot unravels.
The pain that will not let go;
the dread that will not ease up.
This knife-edge of deep shadow
clarifying persistent doubts.

10.
Once again the backlog extends into evening,
all the columns that will not total out,
the correspondence nagging from the inbox. Nothing alleviates the ambient lighting, not the radio, not the snippets of small talk—movie plots and one-day markdowns, close-out pricing, starlet tells all. Shooting the breeze as it enters the window and shuffles the papers, the eight common fallacies of the modern workplace all on display in the décor, the attire, the mise en scène. Somewhere beyond this door a telephone is ringing and ringing. Will there be an answer? Yes and no. No.

11.
It’s a hard road into this place, and a longer way out. The dark woods, the lonely storefront, no one to pump the gas. The moment for resolution has passed. Nothing to do but sit and wait out the gloaming. A dog barks in the distance. Raccoons scour garbage. Even a shotgun blast would be welcome. The next milepost is unknown, far off, and there won’t be a soul for all the trouble.

12.
Motels are for taking stock, the degradation of surface sheen. Illuminated objects become a reminder of the journey’s faulty premise. The window frames a landscape of uncertainties, the map has more questions than answers about the road ahead. It has become important to linger a moment on this bed, ignoring for the time being the suitcase’s insistent claim. The western sky, reflected in mirrors, promises a hard spell of aimless wandering.
Stationery on the desktop. What would a letter home say? Who would be there to read it?

13.
Early morning, not yet seven, and already a desolate atmosphere scarring the town’s main drag. Shuttered storefronts, wind-blown trash. Obscured messages taped to window panes. A lone walker on an errand. What is his cause? Medicine? Milk? The paper? A dog answers his footsteps with desultory barks, a gate creaks on its hinges. Doorways recede deep into shadow, reluctant to let their secrets out. Dawn without promise; light without glow.

14.
The doctor called it anxiety, a book said dread. Her friend shook her head: *just a funk,* girl, *ocean air’s what you need.* You’ll be right as rain, no time.
Now she’s looking out a window: dunes, sea oats, blue horizon, that same blunt feeling adrift on the wind that tousles her hair. Down on the beach a boat is dead; gulls cry. She wants to shed her clothes and all constraint, let sunlight warm her skin but there’s no warmth here, the light strangely cold. Fragments of a dream needle her, and when she hears the words *Lucy, honey, what’s wrong,* the prickling of her skin is more than she can bear. There could be tears, but there won’t be tears, only a plea. *I must make a clean break, I must.*
15.
All too abruptly daylight leaves the room. 
His prospects for the next few hours: 
not good. He’s had a dream 
but lost the content, whatever stirs 
beyond the pane, teasing the edge 
of darkness, doesn’t want his prayers. 
Even the air is nervous, charged, 
his skin is like paper at the cusp 
of flame. All day it’s been a slow burn. 
He expects the earth to feel dead, 
absolutely dead, despite the kinetic dance, 
the electric particles, the flare 
that startles these window highlights. 
There’s a ritualistic text—secret 
wisdom—to explain this night surge 
but the code is lost, the words amount 
to nonsense, nothing more, even if 
the sound is lovely enough to inspire faith. 
Won’t such clamor only be futile? 
Won’t expression quickly pall? 
So it goes when the day dies and night 
filters into the corridors, the rooms 
where novices await insight.

16.
Drink, drank, drunk again— 
the various conjugations 
of the DTs. And now storms 
in the offing, “Stormy Weather” 
on the radio, droll cosmic joke. 
Crabs on the boil, crustaceans 
writhing in a murky sky. 
A man gropes in the blue light 
of a motel room, hand brushing 
objects he can’t identify. 
Sand blows against the screen 
of an unhinged door. Somewhere, 
beyond vision, storm clouds
are tossing in their sleep.
The morning mirror reveals
a doped dreamer sloshing about,
the waterline knee-deep and rising.
In motel rooms across the island,
dead-end drummers rifle suitcases
wondering what to wear
for a monsoon season too soon come.
By now the man should know the drill:
it’s past time to get his wardrobe out,
ready for the season, his last for sure.
He knows what to do but can’t
bring himself to act. Stasis is absolute.

There it is, closer now: the sound,
the smell of the coming rain.

Christopher Woods, *Dewert*, photograph