

The Life of Inanimate Objects

When her father stopped speaking
it was always to punish. Perhaps she left
the sprinkler sputtering

and flooded the lawn or used a kitchen fork
in the garden. Then, for a day or more
he'd walk past her in the hallway,

or go on eating his toast at breakfast,
dipping it again and again into his coffee,
as though she were only a window

he wasn't in the mood to look through.
Most days she did her chores
with her mouth closed, her mind

to herself, and sometimes for weeks
nothing went wrong.
On the way to school he might suggest

they sing together in the car, impressed
at the long stretch of her good behavior.
The most she ever spent on gifts

she spent on his—an Egyptian leather
wallet he wouldn't use until his old one
fell apart, the painting he'd hung

in their darkest hall so it wouldn't be "ruined"
by light. One night she heard
her mother's cracked voice, ghostlike,

pleading, she suspected, to her father's back
then to the fleurs-de-lis thriving
on the wallpaper. If they could have,

they would have answered.