Shahada

CAITLIN JOHNSON CASTELAZ

Inside our textbooks
there is a calligraphed verse
that reads:
lá ilâha illā allâh
which is either a belief,
or a threat, or some elegant
music for the tongue to play.

My professor teaches
an opinion about it
that he’s eager I share
and I do,
with the bartered certitude of a soldier
or a scolded child.

I pick up the pencil
either to trace the arabesque
or to snap the lead
or to hold an instrument
that after years of use and misuse
will wear down to nothing.
And I repeat what I know.

1 The Muslim profession of faith: “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.”