

ON AND ON (AND OFF AGAIN)

TONY WHEDON

I put my horn down as the bass player completes
his chorus & wait for a last cadenza
that never comes. It's all stopped in mid-motion

& goes on & on, the tenor clicking his keys,
the drummer goosing his foot cymbal.

Someone in the parking lot's sniffing plastics.
Someone's in mid-kiss smoothing out
her yellow dress. The tune we're playing

carries us back to a greener time when
dreams were heartbreak, when words mattered:

I woke to a note on my pillow.
"Play 'I Should Care,'" it said, play
"Oh look at Me Now." The tenor picks up

where I left off, drifting into something
so sweet the girl in the yellow dress quits crying.

I like to think these thoughts that fail to make it
from my mouthpiece to the bell of my horn
have to do with wisdom; but I'm dripping sweat

I'm awash with hard-to-live-by illusions.
Most of us flame out before fifty

no faltering last chorus, no fading like smoke
 into a photograph from the last century to mark
our passing. The lucky ones muster a lick

or two before the notes they play turn to dust.