

Inside the Cardinal

I'm in the belly of a bird and I'm singing red—
my sharp crest spiking when I down-slur.
I'm your mother's voice as she spots me
from the old porch, the shrill
of the stand-up Yamaha, the vibrating e-string
on the yellow strat—
Will you love my loud, metallic song?

I like to sit low in the shrubs,
and hang out in the woodlots.
Don't try to explain my sound—
it's too red, too
hot—
Look at me hunched over, my tail
pointed straight down.

It's just a small fire in me but soon
it will flame,
with the next intruder, the next shot
of wind, the next mourning:
filling the air with a dark carbon—
it will take your head off
a thousand times over.

Stricken

We're sitting in Uncle Sam's Subs, splitting
a cheesesteak, when Kat says:
I think I should buy a gun.
I look up at her puffy face, and she's staring,
her hands shaking. On medication for
schizophrenia, she's serious.
I say, Tell me why you need a gun.
Her voice getting louder: You know why.
No, no I don't, I say.
In case I need it. I might need it to shoot somebody.
I give her a hard look—You don't need a gun.
No one is after you.
She stares back: You might be after me.
I don't know what to say—I never know what to say.
I know it's not her speaking, but it's my friend,
far away in some other stricken mind.
What's it like to know you're right/
you're in danger—
and the world says no?
Every woman I know has lived that.
I say: I would never hurt you. I'm not a threat to you.
She laughs, says, Well, you might be.
The laughing scares me.
I want out of this place,
this sub shop, to walk away,
knowing she can't walk out of her mind, leave
the illness behind. The long minutes,
the long, long minutes. Kat says, What do you think?
I think we should eat our sandwiches, then
take a walk, I say.
What about the gun?

Let's talk about it later, I say,
not knowing a thing.
Not knowing a goddamn thing.

The Kindness

Banff, Alberta

The mother elk & 2 babies are sniffing
the metal handle of the bear-proof trash bin.

I remember the instructions for city people:
3 football fields of space between you &
the elk if their babies are with them.

I'm backing up slowly,
watching the calves run into each other
as they bend to eat grass/look up
at the mother at the same time.

The caramel color of their coat,
the sloping line of their small snouts &
I want to hold that beauty,
steal it for me,

but I'm only on football field #2 & backing
into the woods past the lodge pole pines.

Their fragility, their awkward bumping
opens me to a long ago time—

 a hand on the door,

 I was walking in

to the psych hospital in Pittsburgh,
feeling broken & stripped down—

 a hand on the door

 from around my body

& I looked up to see the body
of a man, who said:

Let me get that for you—

 a hand on the door

 & the bottom of me

 dropped/

I couldn't breathe for the kindness.
I couldn't say how deep that went
for me.
I had been backing up, awkward/
I had been blind to my own beauty.