

# Betsy Struthers / PROTECTIVE COLORATION OF THE HEART

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We take chances coming here  
in autumn. Duck hunters  
drift their boats into the bay  
at dawn. On the still water  
gray shapes of men  
hunched in ponchos,  
thin smoke of cigarettes,  
guns cocked, aimed  
at the empty sky.

And in the woods, we keep the dog  
leashed. Big and brown, she  
might be taken for deer  
by a boy crazy for blood  
and whisky, his uncles' teasing  
loud in his ears. Sometimes  
we find trunks discarded,  
the raw red wound  
where the head was.

Men. You also  
back away from the pickups  
left parked on the fire trails.  
Under the covers  
we curl, clasp hands  
while gunshots crack  
the earliest light,  
leave the loons  
keening.

Paces from window to door, verandah to bedroom, excuses herself often to pee, slam of the screen, thunk of the outhouse door closing. Comes back, giggling about spiders and mice, chewing her nails.

It's not just that she's given up smoking, she's quit sex also, the men our age either gay or not single or something wrong with their look, their eyes trained from the neck downwards. You're so lucky she says and I flinch. I can see you outside in a cloud of flies, guarding the barbecue, nursing a beer. As long as she's here, you won't touch me. As long as she's here, you read murders in bed, one light left late in the dark. She won't go for hikes or out in the canoe.

She wants to shop, find a bar, tell all the old stories. Are there bears? she asks us again. What about those signs on the highway, the deer in flight, always a buck. The point of its horns. The long distance. The danger at night.

Deer, caught in the headlights.  
 Another and then another steps from the bush,  
 stops, all stare at me staring at them.  
 My hand tight on the dog's muzzle  
 but she's trembling without sound  
 just that eager shake. The rush  
 of silence when I switch the engine off  
 fills with the rustle of leaves and lake water.  
 Only my right hand moves so slowly  
 towards the camera pack. Doe coughs  
 and they're gone, a whirl of legs  
 and white tails, the dog hysterical.

If you had been here with me  
 I would have said, Look.  
 If I had had the camera ready  
 I could have said, Look at this,  
 a photo black on white  
 of eyes, the taut skin  
 of their mouths.  
 I drink scotch neat, the cabin  
 full of shadows while the dog  
 twitches her paws in sleep  
 dreaming, as you will be dreaming now  
 in our white bed in the city,  
 of the chase, the ecstasy  
 of falling. My teeth  
 for want of any target  
 fix on my hand.