

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.