

"Early light" and Other Poems

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Early light,

and his bark is crescendo and flourish,
a running up and down the scales

I've rarely heard from him. Rushed
out of sleep, I know enough

not to *shush*. Instead, I am up,
yesterday's shirt over my head,

and we are 30,000 years
into this, one urgency matching

another, his nose, my sight
his whiff of not quite right.

There in the dead leaves beside
the trashcan's green husk is

the other animal, raccoon
on its back, convulsions.

Rabies? Distemper? He'd hurl
himself into this ring of

infection, nose right up to
death. I hold his squirming,

muscular anger. Where does he
end and I begin? His vaccinations,

my hesitations. And I cannot help
this other, who has lived its whole life

without me, swaying now, vulnerable
as a drunk, tiny paws on the glass.

My other's sharp barks shore
the boundaries. We are darned

domestication, mesh-bodied
behind the built. Foolish apart

but wise together, we wait
for the neighbor with the gun.

all night the cows and their calves

bellow across barbed wire
cows on the right at the pasture's brink
calves on the left in the muddy paddock
a road runs through them

cows on the right at the pasture's brink
why write bellow and not cry?
a road runs through them
one calf's younger than the rest and thinner

why write bellow and not cry?

they do not make the sounds we'd make
one calf's younger than the rest and thinner
all Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, too

they do not make the sounds we'd make
commotion in the soft, green hills
all Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, too
now that I know to hear them

commotion in the soft, green hills
but why commotion and not grief?
now I know to hear them
I walk the dogs each day to see

commotion sounds so much like grief
they smash gates, tear down fences
I walk the dogs today to see
raise up my voice to join the keen

cattleman, he shuts gates, mends fences
says the nursing's all but stopped
I raise my voice to join the keen
brood cows bred to breed and breed again

the nursing's all but stopped
six years is what they get, not a bad life
brood cows bred to breed and breed again
though they could live for twenty years or more

six years is what they get, not a bad life
though he can't come to kill the cow he knows
they could live for twenty years or more
and so he hires another man who can

and even he can't kill the cow he knows
calves on the left in the muddy paddock
and so he hires another man who can
hour after hour they cry across barbed wire

Forecast

In Appalachia old-timers drop a bean
in a jar each foggy morning in August.
The number of beans is the number
of snows in the coming winter.

Who shall we ask for the forecast?
The blackcap chickadee fluffs her feathers
outside my window. She is hungry
for seed, and I can do that much.

Winter. I am learning winter
like each blue vein
in my mother's forehead.
It is late to learn snow

so early in December. I
fill each feeder again and again
as my mother circles round
each word she cannot say,

watches it, fluffed and cold.
I want to fly like a nuthatch
into the delicate nest of her brain,
pull at the threads, re-weave each vessel.

Instead, I lose count of the foggy mornings,
the snows. My mother has never seen
this much winter. Morning rises pale as a forehead.
Evening closes like another blue vein.

Cardinal

Her eyes flit to the child's memory card—
the splash of red, the bob of the head—

then search my face. My mother is willing,
her blue eyes wide that had been hazel.

It takes a moment, less, for me to see
she's travelled back before Wyeth,

Monet, and Van Gogh, all the painters
she loved, back before representation

itself, before the cave paintings. She is sight
and being, ground hard into the moment.

Cardinalis virginianus is the bird she
hasn't yet seen. If that crested grosbeak

crosses her path again, she'll meet him face
to face, wing to wing. Now when the cardinal

comes to the feeder, I try to see him new.
And her, her too. My mother, a hinge, a door,

a threshold through. Red in the bare branches.
From *cardo*, on which something turns

or depends—once I on her, now she
on me—that turning, that red bird.

What's lost is *cardinal*, the human word
but not the living bird.