

DOUGLAS SMITH

SPRINGHILL, OCTOBER 23, 1958

In the last of the daylight, the daylight
Actually trembled, they said, “cowered”

Like someone who, without knowing, knew—
Something unspeakable was about to happen:

A peculiar taste of dust
In the close, coarse, blackened

Air. *Bord & Pillar, Room & Pillar,*
It doesn't matter what you call it—

Black Damp, After Damp, Choke Damp—

Everyone knows what *not* to say when the mine floor
Goes *Bump* & the roof is coming down & ...

One man's wife is gazing out her kitchen window at the clothesline. The phone rings.
She listens, hangs up, turns on the TV: gaping mouth

Of the mine, paltry balance of daylight, smudged, helmeted
Despondent faces, grainy videotape on a hopeless loop.

The grim Premier arriving. The grim Prince of Wales arriving.
A night of waiting & a hurtful kind of sleep.

At dawn, she stokes the coal-fire, lifts the kettle & looks out:
Thicket of low cloud over thicket of forest scrub, a downy

Repeatedly flying into & out of the frame—cluster of

Dying birch—its black beak splintering bark. Tufty red head

And smart uniform markings: the bird's gallant, she decides, soldierly.

But whatever crawling life is in there, she knows, is being

Stabbed & stabbed & stabbed, innocently ripped apart.

When her brother heard the news, he told her, he was

Taking a leak in the men's room of the Irving Station,

Having just gotten off the bus

From Halifax. The reporter's numbers fell on him

Like dust from the patterned holes of ceiling speakers

And mingled with the toilets flushing & the taps running, truckers

Unbuckling, unzipping, zipping, re-

Buckling. One man in overalls hawked up tobacco, spat

An ochre splat into a gurgling urinal, & the rest of the reporter's details

Spilled on to the floor-tiles, everyone's hands wringing

Under the faucets ...

Overhead, above the parked, useless

Red Cross trucks, on its way somewhere—Boston,

Maybe New York—the plane she watches cuts the morning sky

Thoughtlessly in two. The vapour-trail spreads above the house,

Spreads & leaves patterns she refuses to interpret, while the downy,

Perched on a dead branch, considers the return of mottled daylight

Nothing of any importance.