

Katie Fisher – Countdown

At five a.m., in the frosty darkness,
the tundra swans are talking, down
on the creek where a small flock winters.
How long before they just stay on the tundra?
A rooster crows, bright and staccato, cooped
close by. The planes to and from National
haven't started yet; soon they'll be spewing
CO2 and crowding the clouds. For now,
the air still belongs to the birds, those of the night
and the early risers. Bass hoots from a barred owl
on my left are answered by one off to the right.

Indian Head Highway, even at this hour, drones
a sonic backdrop to the birds—semis shifting
down the grade, diesel rumbling; Golfs, RAVs,
KIAs speeding to town, or somewhere: a twenty-first
century river that drowns out the Potomac. By seven,
men smoking Camels will fire up backhoes on
the corner, gouge out the red Maryland clay, and
lay more sewer pipe than the world needs. Last spring
trees not yet bulldozed housed flickers and thrushes;
soon these raw acres, filled with strange dirt, will
sprout houses for people who plant little bushes.

Unlike me, the squirrels sleep late, in what passes
for a canopy around here. No deer rustle the brush
by the fence. Across the street, dark windows reflect a
waning moon; the only mammal awake, here at the end
of the road, is me. I think too much in the morning.
Not about my mortgage, not about SARS or string
theory, but of swans and owls squeezed, like the penned
cock, by this shrunken world. My laptop is sucking up
juice like there's plenty to spare. Out there, beyond
appliance hum, beyond imagining—listen: the last
oak and ash not planted by us, gasping for air.