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Red

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Lia Purpura

RED

If I let red
be the reward,

and the body of the bird
a medal for thought,

a medal which makes the next thought come:
the reddest red frays to grey underwing:

what, then, shall stand for its hail-colored secrets
and make the bird lift up again—what feeds

a rattling heart its beads of fear, so up
it tramples the corridor of air?

Let me calm the bird with smoke
—burning leaves, coming dusk—I keep

in my fire-stalking eye. Or the bird
will fly off to escape its own burning.

Stay with me. I am warming. I am working
on a song for the occasion. I watch

it eat and its black seed
of an eye. Seed it can't plant

away and be done with.
Reward for what?

For being surprised
a red bird, in dull scraps, keeps happening?

That it is winter, the bird is eating,
or trying to collect? It picks

and tosses dry bits aside,
which it could do, too, if merest brown,

a simple streaked sparrow, or wildly green.
But I watch because the bird is red,

my reason and my measure, and lush
beyond the season. Ripe already.

Its knife of feathers
is a cock's comb—the flower, I mean,

just a small spray though, soft and brief
and convoluted as a fiery brain.

The bush it is in will be forsythia
in a few more months, a yellow going

arm in arm with itself. And red then,
a truly fallen thing,

in collision, seen through stars of flowers,
reward for finding, at yellow's heart,

the bird's solitude and fear.
A reward is a startling thing.