

Cheryl Snell

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Murmuration

1)

Mother slips into sleep  
beside the banked fire.

The red pulse at its core  
warms her bones,  
but it's flesh  
that keeps her rooted here,  
a steeple of fingers  
under the chin.

When she opens scribbled lids  
to dreams already pulling away,  
her hands, twined at the thumb,  
flutter.

Along the route  
of her dreamed migrations,  
two birds followed one another  
into the guttering shadows.

2)

Nature tosses a flock  
to the sky  
as if from a pail  
of water. Ochre beaks  
point out in showgirl synch  
whatever  
it is we've missed--  
the backscatter  
of survival,  
the bend and break  
of an injured wing.

If by some thin volition  
it lifts, touching down  
on a wire  
miles away, it will float  
undistinguished  
from its fellows,  
above the dusk road  
in the face of a setting sun.

3)

By the time our father bolted  
from his sickbed to squeeze  
the nurse's breast, we'd worked  
ourselves into a frenzy of waiting.

When he fell back on the pillow,  
he's sleeping, we whispered.  
He can't hear our words' mad buzz.

Outside, a chirping bird  
hovered above a broken cricket  
dragging through backyard thatch.

It rose up, sudden as a mind changing,  
and the room sagged with breath  
held against the last thing we wanted  
to see: a pair of wings escaping,  
the world left out of reach.

4)

A bird calls,  
jerks its head  
to take in the carnage  
of the storm, rubs against  
a church pew lodged in the spar  
of a splintered telephone pole.

Torn blossoms glimmer  
above a rich sorrow of worms.  
Dazed, the bird has lost  
longitude and latitude of home.

Hurled through with feathers,  
the air is filled with wings luffing  
across the rusting sun.

All the bird has to do is follow its fellow,  
leave a wake of shipwrecked city behind.

The machines have all ceased speaking.  
Water stains spread, brown-edged maps  
to nowhere.

5)

A call like a rusty hinge  
skreaks overhead.

Garden gates open  
only to close again reluctantly.

But this is not about redemption,  
it's about identity

and how the glazed sky  
hurled through with feathers

will sometimes part like water  
for one bird.

It comes to perch  
on a tangle of branches,

and suddenly there are many birds.