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A Gift Lost

By Tyler Cross

I catch a flock of songbirds flying behind a net of lilac bushes, riding a wave of air I can't see. How do they ripple as a group?

Past the bushes, stalks of grass and a creek sit a row of three crusted elms. The surviving treetops, splayed like wire brushes, are stippled grey with birds. Bouncing, pecking, the limbs are covered in tweeters and I remember when, as a child, I broke nest eggs. Found them in a bush and crushed them underfoot.

The trees before me chitter like rumba shakers. I want to apologize for my blasphemy upon their brethren. I step closer and a pebble under my heel scrapes against the sidewalk; its sound pierces the air.

Like the uproar of a wind across a thousand sheets of paper, the air suddenly warps around the trees. A mesh of tiny flapping parts erupts into a tremendous flutter, pluming over my head.

There is no recognizable leader. Each bird is a segment of the total fabric of the flock. Their personal space stretches and constricts across the carpet of feathers, but wings never touch, like a school of fish, or a hive of bees. Even like a tree, when it gets battered by puffs of wind, punching divots in its fluffy contours. What is the trunk of the flock? How do they unify? When one dies, do the rest of them feel it?

And then they are gone, over the horizon of trees. I strain but only glimpse a wave, like a roll of smoke, flow over a house in the distance.