

Morning Worship

She goes outside in the early morning
to put seed in the bird feeders, wearing
sweatpants and unlaced work boots,

flannel shirt, a jacket if it's below 20.
Peanuts for the squirrels, a scoop
of sunflower seeds, millet, corn, and if

she remembers, cakes of energy rich suet.
A chickadee calls from nearby, zip dives
down to perch on a branch near her head,

scolding her to hurry. Redwing blackbirds
in the cottonwood serenade her presence.
She fills the bird bath with warm water,

finds beneath the body of a dead dove.
Not enough lingering feather tufts for a cat
sacrifice, a red-tailed hawk would have flown

off with the prize. Tenderly, she wraps it
in plastic, disposes of the quiet thing. This
is her self-assigned duty, to tend the flock.

Every loss a pang, every cheerful song
a sermon on love. This is her church,
her choir, her reason to rise in the morning.

The Couple at Dinner

We read at the kitchen table,
turn pages in sync over spaghetti,
chewing punctuated by sporadic
murmurs of listen to this.

Our orbit is backwards.
You self-soothe with non-fiction
me with fiction genres,
reading material thick and juicy.
Both of us devour cookbooks,
neither touching a magazine.

Another night, book, dinner.
Scrape of fork on plate,
knife sawing through steak,
playlist in the background
soft through Alexa's tinny speakers.
You offer an interesting tidbit,
me a delightful turn of phrase.
A half glass of wine later,
the dog licks scraps from the plate
dishes get washed and stacked,
we go our separate ways
bookmark the passage,
a fiction, an essay on life.

Lazy Evening Interlude

Tonight at dusk we lounge in lawn chairs,
watch the moon rise over the back fence,
pale light caressing the blooms
of garden flowers, stroking them to sleep
the way a parent lulls a reluctant child
to rest. My glass of wine deepens to black,
sparkles of Orion twinkle the surface.
I drink the night sip by sip as the rabbits
sneak out, long teeth snipping the fronds
of garden carrots. We watch, hushed
by the moon, drunk on the shadows,
waiting for the stars to call us home.

After a Long Absence, I Return

I pass a flock of red winged blackbirds.
They startle, rise and fall like breath,
arrow away across an open field,
disappear into fine river mist.

Alone in a shrouded world,
hills rise from thinning fog.
After so long away, the road is new.
I trust the GPS, drive to our old house,
an approaching specter in the fog.

Hellhounds erupt out the back door.
My brother follows, an apparition—
heavier, beard tinged gray—deep voice
calling off the dogs, greeting me.

He looks like our father.

The missed time evaporates.
Morning sun hammers at clouds
as my heart rises and rises again,
following the path of blackbirds,
whirling, an exhalation of haze.

Messengers

My gaze rivets on the cardinal,
scarlet streak at dawn.
He follows me through the woods
flits from branch to branch
warning me off his domain
with a two-part whistle capped
by a trill. I am the intruder
in his winter bare world.

My boots crunch snow
and puffs of breath hang above
my hand-knit cowl of alpaca
and wool. The red bird follows
me to a leaning sugar maple.
Ahead, another trilling song rises.

A red ruffed rival welcomes me
to new territory. His olive tinged
mate darts overhead. I'm not
sure what I've done to attract
such undivided attention. Brash
guardians, passing me from zone
to zone, my little winged heralds.

Lore says cardinals are harbingers
of good fortune, and it must be true,
because my good fortune is to share
a hike with myself, the glittering snow,
the comfort of red birds shepherding,
winged emissaries, envoys from above.

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