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Migration

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MIGRATION

natasha gallagher

Once a week, I have this dream. The two of us, a pair of birds.

We're perched in the middle of a violet sky. We sit on powerlines or wisps of clouds, the roofs of city skyscrapers or the sunburnt tiptops of trees where we almost disappear. You start to sing. Showtunes mostly. And then we leap into a breeze, soft and wandering as your whisper.

Last March we were robins, rusty and grey and worn out by the winter, holding each other up, and just waiting, waiting, waiting until the top crust of the ice cracked, and the snow ran down in rivers to seep into the earth.

In the tallest pine we could find, we had built a nest out of faded old road maps and ribbons, lost forgotten things like mittens and dreams. And that spring, we slept there as the streets started to flood. The tide crawled up the tree trunks and erased the shoreline completely. Little silver-scaled minnows lived in our old neighbor's garden, nipping at crocuses and wondering where the ocean algae went. And we watched from the air as a whale swam down the interstate, its belly brushing over the tops of old Honda Civics and Ford pickup trucks.

And the two of us, shaking water off our feathers. How blue and misty and still, this saltwater world. Everything around us submerged in the sea. But I told you that birds couldn't be divers, afraid these new torrents might wash you away.

And once, for two whole months, we stayed scarlet tanagers. That's the summer we flew for days, over whole towns and forests. Dipped into the Atlantic and traced our way along the coast. We soared over rows of pastel painted apartments, over smog soaked cities, where the air was heavy and hard to breathe. We perched on windowsills and tasted apricot pies in the afternoon and awoke on café awnings that smelled like cinnamon. We read poetry over the shoulders of students laying in grassy, sundrenched parks. Plath. Keats. Frost. We chased the sun as it unraveled along the horizon line.

When we got to Arizona, the sky was on fire. We folded our wings and nestled amongst the branches of a juniper tree. The sun was burning too bright, melting the mountaintops around us. Rock faces dripped like wax, sinking into the desert sands like lost gold. The afternoon blazed, a kaleidoscopic inferno, colors seeping right out of the sky. Blinding golds and reds and fire ember oranges, pooling at plateau bases. New canyons eroded before our eyes, cut by rivers of light.

And the two of us took to the air, following those carved-out ravines. Swooping along the shorelines of rainbow-flecked rivers. And then the animals, slowly, slowly, they came out to drink. A deer fawn slid down to the edge of the river, swallowing daylight, turning its coat the shades of a sunrise. I looked over at you and you had turned into a phoenix. I could already see the flames leaping in your eyes and I was afraid you'd burn up all at once.

Tonight, tonight, I dream of us again.

We become nightingales at midnight. And when the moon is full, we begin to sing. For hours on end, we play with the crickets and the wood frogs and the moths. Someone plays percussion. Someone strums a harp. An old toad croons this ballad that sounds like a wish being made and feels like breathing together.

Slowly, or perhaps suddenly, the music stops. When we pause for a breath, we see the world has gone silent. The sun and the moon have long melted away. And we stare at each other and we stare up above and we wait for a morning that doesn't want to arrive. All around us is ink, dark as the bottom of the ocean. All around us are stars, a billion blinking fireflies, dancing around the sky. The night shimmers like an oil spill, flashes like fish scales, like sparks from a fire.

And the two of us, we swoop into the night and skate between the stars. All this darkness, dizzying and boundless and not dark at all. There's you, so close here, in the glittering dark. There's us, racing each other among shooting stars, alive, alive, alive. And there's me, asleep, in a place without wings, somewhere far, far away.