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The Last Migration: Amherst, Mass.,
Winter, 1981 · *Jeanne Murray Walker*

for Stephanie Kraft

The last shred of light falls on your wrist
like gauze. You lean at your hall window
to hear the hemlocks tossing in the wind
— old women, ankle deep in shadow
now, and wading deeper in. The dark ground
is glazed with ice. Winter's come early.
Hardly any sunlight bandages your hill's
steep cold.

The birds that nest
in those old skirts should pack
their heads beneath their wings. Enough,
to dream about a burst of golden seeds
and summer in some place the sun finds
health. It's too late to fly south.

Your eyes watch them like lost hopes.
Everything must have some ending.
You recite their names: geese,
starlings, swallows, vesper sparrows,
and in this ceremony you are either accurate
or sorry. You are both.

You get it right.
Truth is the thing you pull around your shoulders
like a shawl against the human chill. By incantation
like sunlight on the tongue, you name them.

As though they hear, they part the air
with beaks as dark as liver. Slow,
puffed out like foam, losing heat,
circling, they swoop, and almost stall. They rise.
Look. For all the weeks they need,
some knowledge inside their ribs will search
like lanterns the dark way they have to go.

Turning from the window, you pull
your sweater close. Through cold they drill
for those unlikely homes that you could name:
Peru, the Carolinas, Tennessee, Mexico.