

Monologue With Birds

For Arnold E. "Ted" Davidson, 1936-1999

The hawk, I should note, might be particularly significant to me because, when my own mother was dying in a hospital, her Cree son-in-law looked out the window to see a circling hawk and told her that the hawk was flying, that she could go peacefully now.

— ARNOLD E. DAVIDSON, *Coyote Country*

I wish you could be with me, Mother.
Lately I've let the morphine-drip run freely,
like a stream swollen with February's snow
dropped from sycamore boughs in April.
I've dreamed less but more intently.
Several times I've opened my eyes
and could have sworn that below my chest
was nothing but a plastic tube.
I asked the nurse about it and remember
that she promised to find me something
more permanent, like aluminum or steel.

Since the doctors ran out of treatments,
I've started inventing my own.
Today I had Doctor Russell remove my organs
and turn them into birds: liver into egret,
colon into thrush, pancreas into three starlings
that fought over a roll the orderly
brought for lunch. Doctor Russell
showed me a biopsy under the microscope,
pointing out each cancerous cell.
He waved his hand, and the cells
became a swarm of chickadees
that burst from my window like the wind.

Later, things will be different. Doctor Russell
will return with pictures of dark lesions
and not wanting to raise false hopes
will tell me again how there is no cure.
He will remind me that these things run in the family
and say — perhaps in your voice —
that even in bad times blood clings to blood.
He won't use these words exactly,
but they will hang shadow-like on every phrase.
If not this organ, then that one;
the Big C becomes the Big D in the end.

Meanwhile I'll be watching the birds
turn resplendent circles through the sky.
I'll search for you at their center until they split
and scatter toward every horizon.
From far away they will watch over me at night,
pin-pricks of light flung like almost-angels
through the wet muslin air.

Mother, hear me: if I speak with a fanatic voice,
it is only because dreams are histories
just learning to step from the branches,
and death is the red wing of a hawk
slicing through the trees.
And fear is a sometimes neighbor
we used to see beyond the fields, so distant
that he looked like a bird himself
when he waved and chased the crows from the soil.

Even back then, we must have resided
somewhere between earth and air —
the lament of taut-necked geese
and the love-call of loons
both telling us that there are no beginnings or endings
but only circles, migrations without surcease.

Mother,
the clock on the wall runs backward.
Music that had become words
becomes music again,
and I am not afraid.
Soon I will follow the flying birds
straight to your feet.
Wait for me where you are.
We will travel new skies together.

J. DAVID STEVENS