

SWIFT ANGELS

by Janet Ruth

Mom was the unstated backbone of the family.

*I meant to write about the bobolink,
but the chimney swifts hijacked my thoughts.*

Unlike Dad, a Gilgamesh-type,
Mom never thought of herself as the heroine
of her own story, let alone anyone else's.

*No elaborate plumage,
just a sooty brown to match roosting sites that
gave them their name.*

Yet as a young woman from a Nebraska farm
in the 1950s, she accepted a call
to gift her secretarial skills to the church,
first half-way across the country in Pennsylvania,
then half-way across the world in Europe, where
Dorothy Gale met Gilgamesh.

*They chirp and twitter madly overhead,
little feathered cigars with wings.*

As a child, I heard her rise before winter dawn,
tiptoe downstairs to turn up the thermostat,
then the “ping-pong-ball-bouncing” sound as
heated water rose into the radiator in my room.

*Twisting and turning through the heavens,
aerial acrobats capture insects to feed chicks
in nests plastered to the inside of chimneys.*

A mean word never passed her lips.
Mom lived a frugal life—recycled plastic bags,
sewed her own cloths. She taught me to sew,
no easy task since I did not inherit her patience.
After retiring she learned to quilt and blessed us all.

*Avian scythes slice the sky above my head
into twisting ribbons of cerulean.*

A slip of a woman under the best of circumstances,
the surgery and the cancer reduced her to a
featherweight of her former self.

*From high in the sky
a coffee-colored feather
drifts on the wind,
floats into my trembling hand.*

I sit at her bedside with my brothers and sister,
stand watch beside her. The well-loved life force
contracts within her body's barely recognizable shell,
concentrates for one last brave act.

*The evening is drawing close like a blanket.
I look up into the heavens—
filled with a host of circling, fluttering swifts.*

Then the labored breathing ceases.
There is silence.

This tiny, unassuming woman—
iron bond with our past,
gentle arms that cradled us all,
who sent us into the world
on our own adventures—

has escaped.

She marshalled the strength for one final leap
into what was, for her, not unknown.

I don't know how to balance
celebration of her life
with the grieving.

*The setting sun illuminates
their brown-feathered heads,
transformed with golden halos.*

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