

High School Short Story Winner

The Birds

By Jillian Vordick

The birds arrive in September. Every year, without fail, millions of wings fill the skies of small towns in southern Florida, heading down toward the Everglades. For Sam, the migration is the only hope her town has ever given her. Every year she watches as the birds fly overhead toward their new homes for the winter. She imagines what it would feel like to be one of them. Even as a senior in high school, the birds are still a wonder, the way they were when Sam was learning how to walk. She longs for their movement—or at least she used to.

“Hey, Ma,” Sam called from the front porch as the sound of her mother’s brakes pulled her out of the sky. “You doing all right?”

Her mother, Joanne, fell out of her Honda Civic and crawled across the pavement to stop her lipstick before it rolled into the sewer. She stuffed the lipstick into her overflowing purse and watched as receipts and bills flew out and were carried away into the red Florida sunset by the wind. She was drunk, a little from this morning before work, a little from last night, and a lot from ever since Sam was born.

“Your mama is doing just fine. Why don’t you go inside and worry about yourself for once? Fix your hair up and change out of those horrible sweatpants.”

The porch yawned as Sam walked across and down the steps. She left the safety of the awning and was met with the humid, foggy, thick orange sunset glow of her forgotten street. The night sky would soon arrive. A downed trash can was rolling in her neighbors’ front yard next to a swing held up by tire rubber. Beyond the rows of identical one-story houses covered with crumbling stucco sat the Sunshine Casino Hotel, where her mother had just finished a day of work as a janitor. The sun, though, never shined in the bathrooms and under the slot machines where Joanne spent her days before coming home to a bottle of Miller Lite—the only light she would get all day. As she liked to put it, she worked an “ugly, ugly job.” Sam, however, respected her mother’s work. She liked that her mother cleaned and fixed things; she longed to do the same, for her mother’s cleaning and fixing stopped when she clocked out for the day.

“Ma, seriously, you need help. You don’t look too good. I see the bruises. I’m not a child.”

Joanne snapped up. She patted down her unruly, anciently straightened hair, red as Sam’s, and re-tucked her Casino Worker polo into her khakis. Through the dense Florida air, she gave Sam one of her stares that reached for miles. The warm evening welcomed Joanne’s heated tone.

“Sam. Go inside, and worry about your damn self for once. I have everything under control. I always do.”

The porch screamed this time as Sam stepped on its weak spot on the way to the door. She pulled sharply on the handle and the door wouldn't budge. She kicked. She pushed. She kicked harder, and by the time the door opened her bun had come undone from the top of her head. *Jesus Christ*. She climbed the staircase to her room and stepped over a pile of overdue homework on the ground and arrived at the window. *I swear to God*. The window, thanks to a newly replaced hinge, not God, opened smoothly. Sam climbed out and sat on the slightly slanted rooftop of their house. She watched as a group of birds circled the casino. They were marbled godwits, coming from North Dakota to the Everglades for the winter. Long bills, fat bodies and skinny legs; Sam could always easily identify them. This year though, Sam spotted a tiny baby bird in the mix. It quickly flapped its wings to keep up with the older, larger birds. Up and down and up and down and up and down they went. The leader of the pack dove down toward the streets and then rounded the corner of the hotel and shot upward past the setting sun, above the earth and into the night. The pattern went on and Sam started to lose feeling in her feet as the temperature dropped, but she didn't move. She wasn't ready to go until the birds had said their goodbyes. But they just kept circling, oscillating up and down and around and around like a child running around the hem of her mother's dress. They would do this for days, making bigger and bigger circles until one day they would shoot off in a straight line toward the Everglades and not come back until the spring. Sam's life, she felt, was stuck in circling.

Joanne had raised Sam to be calm and intelligent. She, in between the drinking and the smoking and the gambling, had raised her daughter to survive. She hadn't necessarily been absent in Sam's childhood, but she had only been present enough to make Sam understand that she would one day be on her own. She'd been the kind of mom who'd offer middle-school-age Sam a ride to the mall but not come back until two days later.

The sun had been down for hours and Sam's feet had barely come back up to room temperature when she decided she needed a glass of water. She crept down to the kitchen and grabbed a dirty glass off the counter. She filled the glass with dish soap and scrubbed until her own skin started to crack off. She went to rinse it out and the water wouldn't come on. *Jesus Christ. God, come on. Damn it*. God was no help, so Joanne was the only solution. Sam cracked open her mother's bedroom door and saw her sitting upright on the edge of her bed in the darkness. She felt for the light switch on the bumpy wall and flicked it up. The room exploded with the kind of light in gas station bathrooms. It was uncomfortably yellow, but it couldn't hide the black and purple and blue spots on Joanne's back and arms.

“What in the hell are you doing up in the middle of the night, child? And what makes you think you can just come in here? I got us a house with two damn rooms in it, didn't I?” Joanne had pulled her shirt back over her head before she even finished her first sentence.

“I was gonna grab a glass of water but the faucet is dry. I saw those bills fall out of your bag earlier...” Sam paused. She realized her mother couldn't care less about the unpaid water bill at

3 o'clock in the morning. "Ma, I know what Justin is doing to you. I know you like him a lot and he's the first boyfriend you've had in a while but..."

"You came in here not only to tell me to pay my bills but to tell me who I can date? Sam, get back upstairs before I knock you up there myself."

Circles. They went back and forth like this a lot, circles and circles of this. Joanne was a good-looking, young, single mother in a dead town full of bad-looking, motherless men. They would scope her out, take her in, and swallow her. Sam would pull her out, put her back together, and make her whole again just for another boyfriend to eat her alive moments later. The circles drove Sam crazy. There were circles with her mother and circles at school; she was a smart kid but couldn't turn in her work on time. Teachers would offer help, and for a while there would be A's and maybe a B, and then Joanne would spend the night with a drunken truck driver. Sam would stress and then it would only be D's and F's. *Damn circle of life, I guess.*

Christmas rolled around and Joanne invited Justin for supper. There was half of a honey-baked ham sitting in the center of the table and a few servings of green beans in the microwave when he knocked. He pulled on the door handle, and pulled, and pulled. He twisted and grunted, and despite his proud efforts was defeated. Sam ran over and opened it for him.

"Christ, that's quite the warm welcome, ain't it!" Justin shuffled into the kitchen and slid his oil-stained hands around Joanne's waist. He had just come from the auto shop and made no effort to hide it. He dug a hole into her back with his body and nestled in perfectly, pinning her against the counter. He leaned forward, placed his head on her upper back, and moved his hands up from her waist to her breasts and started breathing heavily. Sam just stood. She stood in the doorway, still holding the broken handle, mouth open, saliva and rage brewing. She watched as Justin sucked Joanne's dignity and pride out of her veins and spit it out on her own kitchen floor. She watched as his sweat dripped onto the newly washed plates on the counter. *I'll need to clean those again.* She felt herself begin to bubble, and she knew the boiling point was near. She slammed the door shut. Justin let go and turned around.

"Well sorry, little lady. Don't mind me, I'm just getting my appetizer in." He smiled at Sam and she saw that he had no teeth. His eyes said nothing, and neither did Sam. They sat down for dinner, and still, Sam was silent, which was unusual for her. Joanne barely spat out a sentence.

"How was work?"

"How was work? Damn, lady, you must be tired or bored or high or somethin'. Since when do we talk about work 'n' s---? Since you asked though, it was good. Lots of brake issues. Always gotta be something wrong with the brakes. When you think about it though, it's not the worst problem to have; just means you can't ever stop."

Sam was jealous of the cars with the broken brakes. She felt her brakes worked so well that she couldn't even start, let alone worry about stopping.

“Excuse me. I’m going up to my room.” Sam put her plate in the sink and started to walk away, but then turned around and began washing it. Since the water bill had been paid and service resumed, she had been furiously cleaning everything in the house, just in case. After putting the plate on the drying rack, she made a show out of wiping the oil stains off the counter, and then ran upstairs. She climbed out of her window and found her spot on the roof. She tried to close her eyes to block out the sounds of falling chairs and bodies slamming against the wall from downstairs. There were screams, and a plate shattered, and so did Sam’s heart, little by little as the hits got louder. The darkness behind her eyelids did her no good. She had no choice but to stare at the ugly casino. At first, she pictured the head bird leading the pack up and down and up and down in those circles around the casino, but this wasn’t what Sam wanted; it wasn’t what she needed. So she began to picture the birds peeling off, one by one, heading south into the sun. She pictured them breaking free from the up and down circle and deciding to complete their journey to the Everglades. Finally, she closed her eyes and heard the sounds of the swamp and could no longer hear her mother’s screams from downstairs.

One day in late spring when the birds had already returned to their northern homes, Joanne didn’t come home after work. *It’s fine, she’s just spending the night at Justin’s.* The following morning, she still hadn’t pulled into the driveway or flung open the front door. Well, she probably went straight to work from his house. That night, and the following morning, and the following night and morning, Joanne still did not come home. She didn’t drop her lipstick or her papers or curse at the door handle or microwave a TV dinner for herself or pop a pimple in the mirror or scold Sam. After a police officer arrived at the door and informed Sam that Joanne had been found in a ditch, stabbed and beaten after refusing to give Sam’s savings to Justin, Sam knew that Joanne would never do any of those things again. She would never hug Sam, never give those random tidbits of motherly advice about tampons and boys, never tell Sam to fix her hair, never do anything ever again.

Sam took to cleaning. She cleaned the kitchen and the dishes and the table, and fixed the holes in the dining room wall where her mother’s body had been so unjustly shoved by her boyfriend-turned-murderer. She cleaned the phone that she had used to call the officer a week after the incident to ensure that Justin would never walk free again. She cleaned the car after getting it back from the station. She cleaned up her life until it shined like freshly oiled rusty metal.

On a quiet Tuesday the following September, after a scorching summer, Sam found herself on the roof, watching the birds. The leader of the pack looked livelier than in previous years. It led the triangular formation in the widest, most energetic loop that any pack had ever flown. The group soared hundreds of feet into the sky above the ugly hotel and then plummeted back to earth. They had a journey, a destination, a desire, and yet they were still circling. Sam sighed. She wanted them to break free from the pattern. Go, birds, go. Sam began to cry as she thought about the days and months and years of her life spent living in circles. *GO, DAMMIT.* She wanted to slam herself into the wall where her mother had been so violently destroyed; where her mother’s circle had begun to look complete. She wanted more than anything in the entire world for the head bird to break its pack free from the circle and begin the end of their

journey to the swamp where they would live a warm, peaceful winter life. She wanted them to make the first move, but they were stuck, so it was up to her. She went inside, grabbed the singular box of her belongings and got into her mother's car. She drove out of her tired neighborhood and past the Sunoco where her mom would buy tequila and a Snickers, past the Winn-Dixie, past the Collier County Branch Library where Joanne would send Sam to do her homework, past El Taquito and Lozano's Mexican. Sam drove past her memories and her childhood and didn't stop to take a breath until she had reached Highway 29. She was forging ahead, south toward the Everglades. The road was empty and lined with swampy forests on either side. She watched the birds in her rearview mirror as they continued to fly in their circle—except for one. Sam spotted a tiny baby bird, and again, its wings struggled to keep up with the grown, seasoned wings of its pack. It suffered as it tried to fly in circles, and eventually, it tore off going south. Sam smiled as her friend followed her to the Everglades Parkway. The bird's migration from north to south was soon going to end, and Sam's had just begun. Her circle had been broken.