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Birds and Other Things We Placed in Our Hearts

After our chests hollowed out, we filled them with birds.

Humans all over the planet filled their ribcages with birds to simulate their hearts, which had shrunk over generations, finally disappearing altogether. We had evolved past having hearts but no one was ready to admit it.

I kept a macaw that was too big for me. He managed to learn my name. He squawked it like a hiccup out my throat.

“Liar,” he said. “Liar, Liar.”

The hole where your heart had been was subtler, gentle, filled with lovebirds that chirped and nipped at your muscle. You were always wincing but pretending to smile.

I had let you pick out both of our birds.

I was glad when the trend of keeping birds in place of our missing hearts died out. One morning we stood side-by-side in our backyard. We opened our chests and our birds flew into the sun, just as we had seen the President and First Lady do on television.

Soon people began putting other things in their chests. They were experimenting. You were among those people.

I was not.

I had grown satisfied with the emptiness inside me. I had decided it was natural. I wanted to love the emptiness inside you, but you wouldn't let me.

Instead you filled your heart-hole with all kinds of things. First, like most people, you went to the butcher's shop and bought a dead heart. You bought the heart of a lamb. Flies gathered on your lips after a week.

Once you filled it with glowsticks and danced in front of me at a party. Your insides shimmered. I imagined you were an exotic marine animal, a jellyfish maybe, and then I thought of my own empty chest, which was like a cave. I wished you were smaller so I could put you inside of me. A tiny version of you was the only thing that would fit where my heart had been.

Otherwise I would have nothing.

Some people put rubber hearts in their chests, designed to look like the real thing. Some people just filled themselves with rocks.

You were always unsatisfied, which was inevitable. I see that now.

You left the house each morning and wandered the city, looking for new items to replace your heart. You came home with pine-cones, jewelry, mini-bottles of booze. Lipstick, teddy bears, a locket in which you placed a sticker with tiny hearts on it. I could tell you had been crying. You came home with things you wanted me to put in my heart-hole. I pretended to try them until I couldn't pretend any longer.

We fought.

No human ever won anything in a fight.

We tried some more anyway.

I could not make you happy.

I tried to put your sadness in my chest and carry it around with me like a beating muscle. It didn't work. Sadness isn't a something that you carry; it is something you wade through.

Soon the air was full of birds, singing. The birds that once inhabited the world's chests had multiplied. They filled the skies with color in great moving bodies like continents shifting above us.

This made me happy to see. I took you out back to show them to you. You told me you had already seen something about it on the News. You went back in the house and got busy looking through old photographs of your family to place inside yourself.

I imagined opening my chest up to let the entire sky fly inside me. I would turn around and walk inside and kneel before you and place my chest against your chest and all the birds in the world would flutter and dance between our bodies. I knew this was impossible, of course, but that didn't matter because I also knew it would never make you happy.

It didn't matter that my heart was empty, only that I could not fill yours in a way that would please you.

I began to spend more time alone, in the attic of our house. I could hear the birds on the roof over my head. "Liar," I once thought I heard one say. "Liar, Liar."

The attic was a nice space to store myself. It was empty in the middle and all around the walls were stacks of old shoeboxes containing all the discarded items

that had once replaced your heart. There was a small round window I opened to breathe.

I breathed a lot. If I concentrated hard enough, I could taste it.

The air tasted like the birdsong that floated on it.

I told you to breathe with me and to just be happy you were breathing and we were together. You looked at me like I was crazy and I knew we would never be fulfilled. Knowing broke something inside of me; I could feel that something in my chest like it had always been there, waiting.