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Grounded

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About the Contributor (Optional)

Abigail (Abby) Shaffer is majoring in professional writing and minoring in creative writing, so apparently she must like to write a lot. In reality, her desire to write is more of a need to write. In any event, she thinks it's pretty great that God gave us words, and she hopes we will make them as true and beautiful and hopeful as we can.

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Nonfiction

GROUNDDED

ABIGAIL SHAFFER

"I worry about the birds," I tell my friend. "Like, where do they go in the winter? How do they stay warm?"

"That's your burden to bear," she laughs.

I'm thinking of the small birds, the ones who don't migrate, who are smaller than my hand and can't escape the snow. Wrens, swallows, chickadees. My internet searches tell me that on cold winter nights, they huddle together or try to find a hiding place. The underside of a bridge. A tree trunk cavity. The depths of an evergreen. An old shoe.

This list sounds something like natural poetry to me, but to the birds it's just the harsh reality of survival. The cold weather came early this year—the community in my part of Ohio experienced about a week of autumn—and I wonder if the birds were blindsided. Did they search for new homes as if it were business as usual, or did they panic at the lack of warm real estate? Do birds sense their body temperature dropping and understand that they may die?

I haven't seen them for weeks, and today I feel like one of them, because no one has seen me either. My friends, on the wing as usual, don't

know that today I'm paralyzed by cold. My disease, so capricious in its schedule, confined me to the nest today. Maybe this, too, sounds poetic; it is not. My internet searches tell me: *Sick birds will go to ground and, because they feel vulnerable, they will hide away.* I am not hiding. Anyone can find me. I am only grounded because I cannot move.

My grandpa once told me he finds sparrows interesting because they are directly mentioned in the Bible. Jesus did say: *"Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will...Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows."* This brings me little comfort. God admits that He still lets sparrows fall to the ground.

Little comfort for the sparrow that someone watches him die.

The church of God is often called "the flock" because of the way the Bible describes us as sheep with a loving Shepherd. Birds, who also travel in flocks, do not have a shepherd, but at least they may choose to share body heat by nesting together. Communities help each other

survive. But I have found that almost no one in my "flock" knows how to deal with suffering unless it is contained within the environment of a hospital room. If that situation is reached, everyone is confident in what to do. If you are suffering in a natural setting—if winter comes for you in the middle of everyone else's summer—no one knows how to warm you. And if they're flying, you don't want to bring them down. *Sick birds hide away...*

Too much metaphor, too much poetry. The reality is a young adult in her bed, dipping in and out of consciousness, physically unable to move. My roommate leaves because she can't help me. My friends don't know anything, so they don't contact me. I shiver under my blankets and, in my brief flickers of wakefulness, wish someone would pull me upright and give me water and play me music. I want to be yanked out of the nest and carried, prone, through the air until my wings start twitching. The trees are so bare.

That's your burden to bear.

I have seen robins in the middle of winter. They all flocked in a specific tree that I passed each

morning; there must have been ten or twenty in those naked branches every day. I called it "the robin tree," or "the tree of robins," and I looked forward to it because it was inexplicable. Now my research tells me: robins do not sing until spring, but they are social in the winter. Flocking means better protection, easier berry-finding, more body heat. But even alone, they can survive below freezing. Their feathers insulate them. "Hope is the thing with feathers," Dickinson said, because the birds with the best layers of feathers can heat themselves in a snowstorm, even though they sure as hell aren't singing.

I remember once when I picked up a baby bird who had fallen out of a tree. I don't remember if he was dusty brown or slate gray; what I do remember is he was small and soft and almost weightless, made of hollow bones. I cupped him in my palms and showed him to an adult, and they told me that by picking him up, I had killed him. His mother would reject him because of my scent. I placed him back on the ground and held back tears.

I also take pictures of dead birds whenever I see them, flattened against the pavement, legs crooked, wings already rotting. I'm not sure why

I do this. Something about them on the ground seems so wrong, so helpless, and so sacred. Something about the ugliness also feels beautiful. I suppose I feel that documenting each corpse is my own way of briefly cradling it in my hand.

I see that I may be too sentimental about birds. (Is sentimentality, though, just another word here to describe affection for what is closely observed?) Regardless, I realize as I consider these things that if God told the truth to His disciples about the sparrows, He feels more affection for these little ones than I do. In which case I wonder if he is the one who directs them to old shoes and evergreens. Or whether he feels a shade of sorrow when it is his "will" to let them fall.

No one has ever told me, "It is God's will that you have your disease." No one has ever tried to explain anything to me except for me: I have written and revised God's divine intentions a hundred times. Erased them all. Asked questions, begged answers, thrown accusations... Don't tell me that Christians believe in God to make themselves feel better. I would likely feel much better at times if I believed in pure

survival, just me against the world, with no God watching. Sick birds pitted against nature, with no God calling them to rest in Him, calling them to come out of hiding.

I don't know how to understand what God says about sparrows. I don't know how to cup hope in my palms without killing it. I still feel helpless when the winds hit me, each time seemingly so out of season, each hiding place so lonely. Sometimes I feel like there's no way to wade through the deep, deep exhaustion without my strength failing completely.

But I believe, I believe, I believe it can happen. When I give in and stop beating my wings and tell God (resentfully) that He can hold me, I really do feel inexplicable peace. I do find rest. It's just the choosing of this that requires strength: the strength to accept being grounded.

Don't try to tell me that all this is too sentimental, too poetic, too unrealistic. I am the one bewildered at inexplicable faith. I am the one surprised by morning song.

I've seen the tree of robins.