

# Ellen McGrath Smith

## WHILE BOTTLING THE WINE

Lyn believed that what they did—the birds at dusk in new September—was singular. “Something’s wrong, They *never* do this.” Crazy starlings whirled against the white sky of our city, patternless as ashes on a pool of wind; haphazardness shut down to order minutes later: they dipped in syncopated lines, flowed away in twos and fours from the peppered eye of their tornado.

Night exhaled on the dying garden. Frank had seen function, purpose in the silliness, a meeting of the birds to pick and peck an order that had been there all along. The three of us returned to bottling wine.

We had to soak and scrub and rinse the bottles, swill hot sulfites through their necks, and take them to the basement for transfusion from the tap. Once finished, we could drink it, thick and red enough to turn my brain into a dark generation of the barrel’s inside.

So that I could travel with my friends, like a goose in a vee, I rejected neither theory on the starlings, and later, when I cried, it was not cause for alarm or concern, for our discussions—some were airborne, some still-buried—carried in their beaks the shells of truths which when I recognize, I cry. And so, when Lyn said, “I *never* want to die,” I wept, afraid I do, at times I do, then rubbed my eyes, and in those wavering black screens, the birds staggered onto steady streams of air.