nonfiction by Kelly Grogan

In the springtime, a starling flits through the trees chirruping softly and builds her nest in the eave of my roof. She's an ordinary bird, common like the finch or the sparrow, a smattering of white freckles flung across her body. Her faintly iridescent feathers glimmer like oil on pavement. Starlings are an invasive species, brought from England to North America in the late seventeenth century. One hundred birds turned to one thousand, to one hundred thousand, to millions. Now there's no memory of her old home, across the ocean. This home is all she knows.

She guards her eggs until they break open and baby starlings emerge, pink, blind, and fragile. They open their mouths wide and call for their mother endlessly, and she dips through the trees, catching insects to feed them. Within a week, a soft blanket of down cloaks their bodies and their big eyes blink open. At two weeks old, the hatchlings crane their necks skyward and turn their heads in wide circles, taking in the world. They sleep nestled together in a fluffy pile, their heads tucked beneath their wings. At three weeks, they tumble and hop from one side of the nest to the other, they stretch their wings and sing in the morning. Then, four weeks, and I hold my breath while they cartwheel into the air. Their landings are clumsy and their hollow-boned wings beat fast to keep them aloft, but it doesn't take long for them to learn. By dusk they can spread their wings like fans, fluttering and tilting to catch the invisible wind.

And one morning, they fly away. They don't come back. Only the nest remains, the grass turned brittle and brown, eggshell fragments angled into the folds of straw. I pluck the bits of shell out of the nest and cup them in the palm of my hand, studying the faint brown freckles, the sharp edges where life broke through. I put them in a small box, to remember. The nest, I leave where she built it. Maybe she'll come back, I think. Maybe she'll come home again.

Home is a place I've never been. A place packed away or abandoned when I move, inevitably and endlessly, to another town, and another, and another. As a child, my family moved with my dad's job, but something shifted when I became a teenager: I grew restless. I started wanting to leave. A pattern was established. In each place I lived, I had to move away just as my feet started to learn the ground. Just as I started to collect a small pile of memories, or began to understand the subtle ways the seasons change, or memorized the back roads and side streets and the best places to sit and watch the sky. When strangers became familiar and routine felt inescapable, when I found myself craving something new, I couldn't help but wonder if I'd ever actually stay anywhere. I wondered what life would be like if I never grew roots, if I never found home.

The starling summer is my first summer in Maine, the same summer I'm hired to babysit an eleven-year-old girl named Addie, while her parents run a restaurant. Babysit is something of a misnomer—she's too old for babysitting, so we say we're hanging out. Within weeks we become close friends, within a few months, more like sisters.

Summer belongs to us. Our favorite thing to do is drive into town and walk around, watching strangers and drawing caricatures of the people we meet or imagine, sketching out stories with charcoal-smudged fingers. Bar Harbor comes to life in the summertime, tourists flocking to the island to visit Acadia and eat rich, buttery lobster straight from the sea. Main Street is only a few blocks long, but in July the crowds are as dense as in any city, and the stores that have been shuttered and silent through the long, cold winter are open again, their windows glittering with trinkets and souvenirs. Addie and I avoid the crowds, settling instead on a bench beside the gazebo at Town Square. There we build worlds out of the soft grass of the park while the fireflies dance in the dusk. We talk late into the night, about school and friendships and boys, about her parents and the restaurant and being an only child, about what it feels like to be alone.

Addie has a habit of asking questions I don't know the answers to. Not knowing never deters her. Sometimes I think she saves up her questions until I'm with her, until we can turn a question into a conversation.

"Do you know what a group of penguins is called?" she asks one night. I scratch a mosquito bite on my ankle, watching a line of ants wind over the sidewalk.

"A colony," I say. She considers the answer.

"What about owls?"

"I don't know. A flock, maybe."

"That's geese."

I shrug and say nothing. I try not to let not knowing bother me.

"A bunch of cormorants are called a flight," she says.

"How do you know what cormorants are called?"

"I read about it."

When she falls asleep that night, I can't resist looking it up. It turns out the name for a group of owls is a parliament. Which is just the beginning of the strange and deliberate poetry of bird group names. Crows, for instance, belong to a murder. Ravens meet in an unkindness. There are bouquets of pheasants, sieges of herons, wisps of snipe. Hawks form a cast, eagles a congregation, and raptors a cauldron. Imagine the percussive song of a descent of woodpeckers; the plaintive odes of a lamentation of swans; the sweet, gentle lullabies of a pitying of turtledoves. Picture an ostentation of peacocks with rustling sapphire skirts, plumage threaded with cashmere.

I copy the bird names into the page of a notebook and leave it tucked under Addie's door. When she finds them in the morning, they will read like a poem written just for her.

Addie loves talking about dreams. She wants to know how dreams change as we grow up, what themes emerge and recur over the span of a lifetime. "I try to concentrate on particular things," she tells me one night. "Before I go to sleep. Really concentrate." She believes that if she tries hard enough, she will be able to control the direction of her dreams, rewrite the entire night's story for herself.

When she asks me what I dream about, I tell her about a dream I've had for years. In the dream, I must move out of my house, but I've waited until the last possible moment to pack. I don't have much time, and I start frantically racing through the rooms and taking inventory of what I can carry with me when I go. When I look at the shelves and cupboards, inside the drawers, and at the art on the walls, I realize that I can't possibly fit all my things in just a few suitcases. I'm going to have to leave some things behind, but as I pile up my belongings I realize everything is significant to me. Nothing

can be abandoned, nothing left behind.

Sometimes, when I remember the different places I've lived, I imagine my path traced along a line of objects that were lost along the way. Things that have long since disappeared. A necklace with smooth, silver beads that warmed when I held them, not particularly valuable or pretty but given to me by someone I once loved. A box of journals and sketchbooks, scribbled poems and stories from my childhood, confessions and hints to a past I feel far away from now. Trinkets and souvenirs and shells from the beach, old clothes that no longer fit, suitcases with broken wheels and boxes tucked into the corners of attics. A small box with tiny eggshell fragments nestled tenderly inside.

Is it so hard to believe that we might leave little pieces of ourselves, too, where we go? Not just objects, but impressions and memories, little fragments. By the time I say goodbye to a place, the word takes something from me. There's a cost to speak it. Does a goodbye linger in the air after I leave? Does the ground remember my name?

A charm of finches. An asylum of loons. An exaltation of larks, singing their reverent hymns to the sun at dawn. A wake of circling buzzards. Nightingales in a watch, parrots in a company. A flamboyance of flamingos, a band of jays, a squadron of pelicans. The list goes on and on.

A parliament of owls murmur back and forth across the canyon late at night. In this case, murmur is sound, specifically, the hooting of an owl. A murmur can also swell in the undertones of a crowd, or in the humming of a child singing herself to sleep. Murmurs are music and language combined; they move like a ripple, gently outward. There's an implicit silence in murmuring: a certain gentleness in soft, white noise. Like words spoken, but barely—the sound a mother makes to her daughter reaching out to brush a smudge of dirt from her cheek.

In autumn, when the starlings leave their nests and gather in dense communities to roost through the winter together, they belong to a murmuration. Throngs of mothers and fathers and babies heeding the same call, moving through the skies toward each other. Together, they are safer than they are alone. Together, they can survive the frozen ground and the bare trees hung with hoarfrost.

Murmuration is also used to describe the phenomena of the starlings' synchronous flights together each evening at dusk. The word is a sound, a gathering, and a careful dance, an air ballet with hundreds of birds flying wing-to-wing in a dense, shifting cloud that billows out like fabric snapped open across the sky. The murmuration is primordial and uncontained; like music, the heart of it is found tucked away in the stillness, the pauses and breaths, the beats of quiet between notes and movement. I have read that when you stand close enough you can hear the snap and rustle of feathers as the starlings' wings flutter. You can feel a breath of air when they change direction.

Scientists have, through careful study and research, been able to decipher what occurs in a starling murmuration. They describe the aerial feat as an example of scale-free correlation. What this means is that, as far as they can tell, there's no singular leader determining the movement of the starlings; the decisions are made collectively. All of the birds lead, and all of the birds follow. The communicating of direction seems to happen instantaneously, but in fact it's like a ripple that spreads in the blink of an eye, every movement impacting the shape. Scientists believe that the starlings adjust their flight pattern based

on the positioning of the seven birds nearest to them. That's the scale-free part—even in robust murmurations with hundreds of starlings, each individual still pays attention only to the seven others surrounding it.

Even though scale-free correlation is a description of the event, it's not an explanation. We know what happens in a murmuration, and we've measured it quite precisely. But we still can't say exactly how it happens. The fluid, graceful pulsing of the birds retains a hint of mystery, a bit of wonder. Watching them dip and twist with the late afternoon sun glinting off the undersides of their wings, there's a feeling that can't be explained, can't be described, something improbable and beautiful and graceful.

People engage in scale-free correlation too, our own kind of dance. Think about six lanes of traffic rushing ahead at fifty miles per hour, changing lanes and entering and exiting from all sides. Think about the movement of the crowds in New York City, walking shoulder to shoulder in dense swarms of bodies, stopping and veering right then left, entering and exiting indeterminable buildings. The pace and direction of your footsteps follows that of the crowd, the direction of your car aligns with traffic. We pay attention to the movements of the people directly around us and adjust our own movements accordingly, trying not to touch.

But sometimes, we run into each other. Sometimes, we collide.

Another day, I ask Addie what she dreamt about and she tells me a dream about running along a narrow road, winding up a steep mountain. She says in the dream she was tired but couldn't stop running. She knew her family was at the top, waiting for her, and it was getting dark. Darker and darker until there was nothing but the pounding of her feet against the pavement, the cold gasp of her breathing: keep going, keep going, keep going.

Family is one name to describe a group of people. There are also crowds, throngs, and masses on the sidewalks, and crews on the job. Clusters, communities, tribes. A cadre of coaches, a cohort of students, a coterie of detectives. The things that I lose or leave behind when I move, necklaces or notebooks or seashells or boxes, have little significance when I think about the people who've faded in the rearview mirror, perpetually waving in my memory. I'm the one leaving, but they're the ones gone. When we collide, for better or for worse, something gets left behind. A sharp-edged fragment that's fallen away. That's how place becomes home, and how leaving becomes goodbye.

To the starlings, a murmuration is home and family combined, and the birds find each other year after year. But it's also true that every spring, after a winter together, the starlings disband, as though some invisible current moves through them and breaks the group into individuals again. They find home then they leave it. Theirs is a dance of perpetual goodbye.

Sometimes when I land in an airport after a flight and have some time to pass before the next leg of my trip, I'll sit at the bar, watching people spill through the terminal. In an airport, everyone is either leaving or returning. Everyone is saying goodbye or hello. I start to feel like there isn't any difference between the two. Here, I can forget the nature of departure, the leaving that happened only that morning, or yesterday, or in a distant place that seems a dream now. For a few

crowded moments, I can let slip away that time before, when all the words seemed empty and I sculpted absence out of the pauses. I can remind myself that no matter how difficult it is to part, something always happens in the space between.

Addie is eighteen now, nearing the age I was when I first met her. I've moved twice since our summers together, south to Boston and then across the country to California. We write each other letters, real letters, with pen and paper. We fill the space between us with words and memories. I try not to give her advice, and when I do give advice, I try to say it sideways—these are the things I wish I'd known, these are the mistakes you don't have to make. I try to remind her: Here are the cracks where life breaks through, here are the feathers turned up in the wind. In as many ways as I can, I say, you're not alone.

Near the end of the starling summer, when we would find ourselves seized with the strange restlessness of too-long nights and thoughts that would not stop racing, we'd go walking through the tangled old-growth forests, searching for somewhere we'd never seen before.

One evening, Addie tells me that she found a hidden waterfall with a clear blue swimming hole beneath. She waited all week to take me there. While we walk, she tells me that she's realized that the only thing standing in our way is ourselves.

"So, how do you get out of your own way?" I ask.

"I don't know yet," she says. "I'm still figuring that part out."

"Me too," I say.

We follow the trail for another half mile before reaching a towering maple tree, the edges of its leaves already brushed crimson with the chill of fall, and Addie turns away from the trail and starts walking into the forest. Her feet know the ground and she walks quickly, but I hesitate, peering into the woods after her. There is no path, and the shadows of the trees are growing longer on the ground. When Addie realizes I'm no longer behind her, she turns around and opens her mouth to say something.

At that moment, the starlings take flight. The sky fills with the silhouettes of birds, the sigh of the wind shifting above us. The birds dip and twist overhead like a shadow unfurling over the treetops, and I think about the starlings from my house, the mother and the baby birds peering into the sky, calling out to each other in the morning, cartwheeling into the air and disappearing. Leaving one home, and arriving here, at another. The murmuration unfolds and spreads wide then curls into itself like flower petals closing. I can feel the flutter of wingbeats in my chest. And, just as quickly as it began, it's over. With a gentle rustling, the curve of the shadow settles into the tops of the trees, the day turns to dusk. Addie smiles at me and we walk on, and I wonder if we'll have to hike back in the dark. And I know that it won't matter, that somehow, we will find our way home. ♦