

Can a Hummingbird Sing?

by T. M. Upchurch

On her way to school it was *Amazing Grace*. Stroking the dog's ears, *Willow*. On holiday, *Moonlight Shadow*. But Anna never sang; decades later she still shrank from the echoes: *You're the first child I ever knew... you're not even...* the glare that gripped her throat. Her music flowed through a reedy, open-mouthed hum that sounded as if she might at any moment break into song.

— Write,
said the teacher. And so she wrote and won and faced him by the piano.
— Now sing it.
— No.
— Sorry?
— I can't sing.
— You can.
— Can't.
— You must. You wrote it, you won, now you have to sing.

He waited for his silence to crush her stutter, forcing her to open her song — but even as she inhaled, the birds flew in and lodged in her throat; a single magpie in her mind, a jackdaw on her voice, wings beating her breath aside. And so she stood, mouth and eyes wide, panic flapping through every orifice.

He leaned forward, his eyes soft. She closed her mouth and failed to meet his gaze.

— Penny for them?
— What?
— Your thoughts?

Before she could still her face, her lip widened and curled, her eyes scrunched and tears spilled like shame down her cheeks.

— She said I couldn't sing. Mrs P, she said, I'm the first child she ever knew that couldn't sing.

— What?

— *And I'm not even tone deaf.*

As if that made it worse; as if her inability had a wilful way.

He paused, reached for her shoulder.

— It's only words.

He said.

— And what use are words if they silence you?

His hand pressed her skin, his warmth more real than any echo, so she met his eyes and her soul hitched a ride on his hope; lighter than air, it rose past the fluttering, as the birds broke free.

