Virus Vigil

Poetry by Jim Blackburn

Art by Isabelle Scurry Chapman
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Early fall on the Texas coast near Oyster Lake,
Experiencing the migration in Matagorda County.

The dirt road runs along the shore
Of Tres Palacios Bay,
Leading to where it joins with Matagorda Bay,
The shell shoreline dotted with the debris
From summer storms long past.

The low scrub is alive,
Migrating butterflies draping the boughs,
Ornaments decorating a living Christmas forest,
Gathering here where the land ends
And the water starts,
Finding rest and food before moving on.

The barred owl stirs in the scrub oak,
Wings extending from the stocky body,
The pug face moving across the landscape,
Away from us, the interlopers,
Who dare invade this sanctuary.

The haunting call of the Sandhill Crane
Penetrates the calm afternoon,
Signaling their arrival from the Platte River,
Announcing their presence, spiraling down,
Bringing the message of the changing season,
Greeting the barred owl
With whom they will spend the winter.

Departing, we greet the first specklebellies
Of the season, the white-fronted geese
Honking hello to the Texas coast,
Honking hello to me and I whisper back
“Hello my friends. Welcome back home.”

Nothing compares to a day on the coast,
Greeting friends, renewing acquaintances,
Living life to the fullest by breathing it,
Seeing it, absorbing it, experiencing it,
Sucking it deep down into my marrow
Where it nourishes my soul.
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Attending services of Earth Church in my mind,
Receiving the ministries of Sister Sandhill.

Surreal music comes from the flock
Of sandhills flying overhead,
The choir leaving the roost
At the Mad Island marsh,
Venturing out to feed,
Music that touches some DNA memory
From a time far back,
Conjuring primal images
Of living in nature as a part of nature,
Living at a time
When the Earth was one with us,
A sound that resonates throughout my being,
A sound reminding me of that which is no more,
An ancient sound of humans and the Earth.

And as sister sandhill takes the podium,
I sit and listen to the wisdom
Of nature’s ways,
About how we have to be adaptable,
About how we need to understand
And respect nature’s cycles,
About how we have strayed from the path,
About how we need to turn it around.
I enjoy thinking on Sister sandhill,
A symbol of my church and Mother Earth,
A symbol of that which holds me together,
And I long in this time of the virus
To be watching four or five sandhills
Grazing on the prairie,
Talking to my mother about staying well.