

GEESE¹

There is no cure for temperament. It's how
we recognize ourselves, but sometimes within it
a narrowing imprisons or is opened, such as when my mother
in her last illness snarled and spat and how this lifted my dour father
into a patient tenderness thereby astounding everyone.
But mostly it hardens who we always were.

If you've been let's say a glass-half-empty kind of girl,
you wake to the chorus of geese overhead forlorn that something
has softened their nasal voices their ugly aggression.
On the ground they're worse than chickens,
but flying—one leader falling back another moving up to pierce the wind
no one in charge or every one in charge—in flight, each limited goose
adjusts its part in the cluster just under the clouds
(Do they mean together to duplicate the cloud?)
like the pelicans on the pond rearranging their shadows
to fool the fish (another collective that constantly recalibrates but fish
don't need to reinvent themselves the way geese do)
when they negotiate the sky.

On the fixed
unyielding ground there is no end to hierarchy—
the flock, the pack, the family—you know it's true. If you're
a take-charge kind of girl, I recommend

house plants in the windows facing south;
the cacti the cyclamen are blooming on the brink
of winter; all it took was a little enforced deprivation,
a little premature and structured dark.

¹ Punctuation added by RJF. There is no punctuation or capitalization in the original poem by Ellen Bryant Voigt from *Headwaters* (Norton 2013), p. 42.