

Starlings

We've only got ten minutes says my mum
and so we stride beneath the arches, cross
the echoing hush of tiled floors and pews
to see the chapterhouse. I lag behind
and spot an A board printed with the words:
*The nave is a journey towards the unknowable
mystery of God.*

I hurry on
and climb the wavelike steps to the chapterhouse,
so full of light it could be made from lace.
A bearded guide recounts the Civil War,
as if he'd seen the shattered glass himself.
My brother checks his phone; we slip away.

We drive across the levels, past the tor.
An old tree sinks diagonally in a pool
and feathered reedheads blaze like sunrays
in the fading light of a winter afternoon.

At Ham Wall stewards help us tuck our cars
in line. An A board tells us *Starlings declined
by sixty per cent since nineteen-ninety four.*
We join the stragglers that trudge
along the abandoned railway line, then wait
with about a hundred people in the cold.

A row of clouds above the skyline gleam
with soft pink light. The marshes feel alert
with winter, like the tone of tingsha bells
receding into stillness.

The first birds
work their way above the sycamores.
and out across the marsh. A murmuration
passes above us like a giant wing
thrumming steadily. There is a pause,
before a line of black descends like rope
then whips the air, merging with other shapes
that swirl above the reeds. Someone said
it wards off predators but that seems wanting
as we stand before this rush of hearts and wings
that choreographs the air with living forms.

We walk along the dyke with other groups,
strangely fulfilled. Some people wait and stare
into the dusk for one last murmuration.
My gaze is drawn by other mysteries:
the stumpy willows, the line of still dark water,
the patterns made by nettles on the path.