

Lifer

We used to think it a mad sparrow before
we learned it was the last migrant to return
and its name explained what it was up to,

flipping off a post or a low-slung branch
with flight controls seemingly gone haywire.
Today, here's the first, hunched at the ready

on the tallest tombstone in the graveyard.
Overhead, against a washed sky brushed
by feathery remnants of raincloud,

swifts are scything the wind, returned only
last week for their circus of high-flown love.
For our souls' health, we need to go on gazing,

stopped in our tracks and sorrows, to mark
the arrivals of birds that cross the world above
our news and wars, our migrations of loss.

Long-haul passerines with their songs of summer.
The swifts twenty-four/seven on the wing.
Birders call their first-ever sighting of a species

new to them, a lifer. For me, each returning
migrant is a lifer again, somehow newer still
in renewing each first of every summer

down the years: harbingers of memory,
human and avian, surely ancestral.
Yet only this moment recalled as exquisitely –

wing-tilt and flecked feather, the lilt of its whistle.
My heart always somersaults as crazily as
the spotted fly-catcher plying his skill under

the churchyard yews like a spirit liberated
from the earth below, skittish with surprise
and quite loopy with life, this fling of resurrection.

Linda Saunders