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Angry Birds

Josh Mathews

When my son turned five he asked
for a stuffed black angry bird. He likes
angry birds, you see, a phone game
he plays in which he slingshots
colorful aggressive birds into elaborate structures
of wood and ice, where ugly green pigs
relax and snort. When he flings the birds just so, creating
the kind of chaos he aimed to create, demolishing the pigs
and their structures, he shakes his body,
stares wide-eyed, and says, “Daddy, I got them.”
It turns out, as he well knows, there are angry birds
for all times and seasons, angry birds in Brazil,
where monkeys, not pigs, are the objects
of attack, angry birds in outer space,
angry birds at Christmas, at Easter, too,
a time when pigs and bunnies and eggs
all get blown up together.
He got his birthday bird, of course.

I know he hasn't quite thought
through yet why exactly these birds are angry.
You'd think, given the point of the game,
that the angry ones would be the pigs. For there they sit,
those pigs, peacefully at home, launching themselves
at nothing and nobody, only for some black bird
to come crashing hard into their house of wood
and ice, igniting and exploding like some screeching
bunkerbuster with a big enough blast radius
to pulverize those complex structures into pixelated dust.
These days people rack up points for this
sort of thing, at least he does, my young son.

I know he hasn't yet seen the wrath of birds.
I mean their real wrath—
not some cockamamie Hitchcock fantasy—

not even the kind of acidic aerial raid
known to melt paint off sports cars and sedans.
There's more to birds than an innocent
bombing campaign or drone attack.
Once, you see, such a bird assaulted me.
A bright red-and-black bird—
a gull, I think—long as an M16—
took a dislike to my entrance into its
unmarked domain. Here I was, in the middle
of an open field, newly planted, on the heartland prairie,
and this bird believed that I was some kind
of dangerous predator. Well he—or she, perhaps—
circled high above, making an awful racket,
and then proceeded to take a hard, fast dive
at my head, straight down at me, a real
kamikaze attack aimed to puncture my brain,
intending to keep its precious domain safe,
protecting its young ones—if it had any—from
the likes of me, a man with a son of my own.
Well that bird, you
might've already guessed—
and you'd have done the same—
was not long for this world.

A lot of good anger did then.

I gave my son his bird.
Maybe one day he'll see the world
from the pigs' point of view.