

Life of Jays

-Sandra Gustin

Stars still out, we meet at McDonald's,
coffee for you, breakfast burrito for me,
small groups of senior citizens already seated
in this hub of a Florida retirement town,
mean age of residents probably around 70.
My dad's big sister, you're a decade older
than that, while I'm almost two younger,
but this day it's you keeping an eye on me,
because you've always lived young,
walk miles every day, and I'm recovering
from serious illness, from a thoracotomy,
ICUs, more pills in a year than I can count.

We're on a mission, to seek the Florida
Scrub-Jay, species officially vulnerable,
habitat scrub oak, and we don't loiter.
After the drive to the small state park,
after the sun rises enough, after we emerge
from the forested trail into sandy, grassy
meadow, I spot the jay, and it's flying
to us, right to us. You stand speechless
as it lights on my canvas hat branded
with a crimson-star logo maybe an inch
high. The bird finds the bright thing
sewed on, gives up, flies away, leaves
us to wonder, to laugh away the rest
of the day with unbelieving family,
to repeat what we heard from the ranger,
how those social Scrub-Jays exist
monogamous, cooperative, how one brood
stays, helps parents raise the next
until they find their own territory, acres
and acres of endangered habitat vital.

You celebrate minor holidays, love
clowns, sport earrings that don't match,
with me are the shortest of the family,
move always in flashes, golden, humming,
though your only son died from AIDS,
your husband from ALS. I'm thinking
that's more suffering than Florida, more
suffering than the world, can bear, yet

you'll get cancer, be gone next year,
your youngest brother, then my dad
within a decade. A generation vanished,
territory left expansive, empty. You
won't be there to walk it with me, laugh
in wonder with me, witness creation's blue
audacity in the face of threat.

Far from Florida I'll open the drawer
where I keep shiny things, find
 an unmatched earring,
 a rhinestone clown.

I would keep you if I could.
I would keep the stars if I could.