Winter birds

by Charles Hughes in the December 18, 2019 issue

“But what about the birds that don’t fly south?”
A boy—age six?—arms full of books—is asking.
The library is closing. We’re in line.
“Some birds don’t mind the cold,” a woman answers.
“They have warm nests. Their feathers keep them warm.”
The boy hesitates, then rejoins, “But Grandma . . .”
He hesitates again as if he’s gathered
His grandmother can’t tell him any more.

Since Christmas, it’s been bitter cold. Tonight
Will tumble icily down to zero or
Below, and there may be, there may well be,
Some birds close by that die tonight, some birds—
The youngest, oldest, hungriest—some birds
That, in this kind of cold, may well shrink deep
Into nests and feathers, just not deep enough
To keep them shivering until the morning.

The boy, his books checked out, his grandmother—
They’re moving toward the door. She’s promising
Hot chocolate and Christmas cookies once they’re home.
Her voice trails off . . .
                They’ve vanished now, although
Two common, everyday realities
Stay put and visible like winter birds:
The suffering and death of innocents;
Love’s presence, unavailing, undeterred.