

*DAVID BAKER*

SWIFT

1.

into flight, the name as velocity,  
a swift is one of two or three hundred  
swirling over the post office smokestack.  
First they rise come dusk to the high sky,

flying from the ivy walls of the bank  
a few at a time, up from graveyard oaks  
and back yards, then more, tightening to orbit  
in a block-wide whirl above the village.

2.

Now they are a flock. Now we're holding hands.  
We're talking in whispers to our kind, who  
stroll in couples from the ice cream shop  
or bike here in small groups to see the birds.

A voice in awe turns inward; as looking  
down into a canyon, the self grows small.  
The smaller swifts are larger for their singing,  
the spatter and high cheep, the shrill of it.

3.

And their quick bat-like alternating wings.  
And the soft pewter sky sets off the black  
checkmark bodies of the birds as they skitter  
like water toward a drain. Now one veers,

dives, as if wing-shot or worse out of the sky  
over the maw of the chimney. Flailing—  
but then pulling out, as another dips  
and the flock reverses its circling.

4.

They seem like leaves spinning in a storm,  
blown wild around us, and we their witnesses.  
Witness the way they finish. The first one  
simply drops into the flue. Then four,

five, in as many seconds, pulling out of  
the swirl, sweep down. So swiftly, we're alone.  
The sky is clear of everything but night.  
We are standing, at a loss, within it.

“Swift” is used with permission by the author.