

Nineteen Degrees  
by Natalie McNabb

It is two days before Thanksgiving and snow is everywhere. Commute times doubled and tripled last night, but I was one of the lucky who headed home before snow started sticking and city busses began sliding down hills despite chains. Several optimistic neighbors have wheeled their garbage cans to the street, but Seattle slows to a near-halt when snow flies. If the university is closed and I am consequently home, the garbage and recycle will remain right where it is for a few more days.

Today, I decide, I may as well make our own turkey; otherwise, we will get what we get at the family gathering and no more. If there are ever leftovers the starving singles take them home. So, if we want to feast on stuffing and turkey sandwiches for a week afterward, a childhood tradition I have not been able to give up, I must make our own.

Sally calls though, and the thawed turkey must wait awhile in the sink. She accuses my husband, son and I of leaving figure eights and donuts in the snow all over her street. When the roads are like this it is just what we do, goofing off with the four-wheelers on roads and side-hills, dropping in on nearby friends hoping for a late-night cocoa. Sally could not or would not get up, and so we left our signature. We discuss the sun that has finally come out, but that will never melt the six inches of snow I am staring at on the back deck, at least not while it is only nineteen degrees out.

Then I see something—a leaf?—hanging from the metal perch that circles the base of the hummingbird feeder just below its red metal flowers. I squint, trying to see it better, and whatever it is moves erratically and then rises nearly level with the metal perch. “I’ve got to go,” I tell Sally and drop the phone on the kitchen table. My husband loves his birds and is always filling our feeders faithfully. He will be devastated if I cannot fix this.

I run to the front door, slip into my shoes and race back, grabbing the red towel from the kitchen counter as I pass. I am out the back door, through the snow and standing at the feeder in an instant. But, when I get there, I can only stare. A hummingbird is hanging upside-down, its talons wrapped around and frozen to the metal perch. This is an Anna’s Hummingbird, not a metallic green and fuchsia male, but a green-tinged and gray-brown female. She flutters, flips partially around. These are the only birds that can fly backwards, but not with their feet stuck to metal. She flips her tiny body, little more than three inches from beak to tail, up and nearly level with the perch again. My husband and I never would have imagined that at nineteen degrees a hummingbird’s feet might become frozen to the metal perch, that by feeding them we might kill one. The hummingbird just hangs there, blinking. I must do *something*.

I wrap the towel around her, but am afraid of crushing her, and though her feet would warm in the towel, it does not seem fast enough. I grab the perch with my middle fingers and thumbs, still cupping the hummingbird in the towel, and lift the feeder from its hook. My first thought is to take it all inside, but I cannot have a hummingbird loose in the house. I consider a hairdryer—plugging it in, warming the metal—, but the blast of air and noise would probably

burst her pea-sized heart. The cord would not be long enough anyway either, and I cannot put the hummingbird and feeder down now without risking an injury worse than what she may already have. She flutters again, settles, and I follow my first instinct—I take the whole thing inside.

I kneel on the floor just inside the door with my elbows on either side of the floor vent and hold the hummingbird, feeder and towel over the warm air. She flutters, becomes still again, and I begin to wonder how she could have hung upside-down like that without breaking her legs—maybe she has. I peek carefully, so that she does not fly off, and carefully so that I do not add to any injuries she may already have. Her eyes are closed, and I open the towel a little more to find that her feet are already free of the perch. Better yet, they do not appear damaged.

I move everything away from the vent and hold it outside the door, hoping she is able to fly. She is so still though, and her eyes remain closed. I prod her with a finger, and she opens her eyes, but just to slits. I prod her again. When she opens her eyes completely and moves, I realize that the crest of her right wing has now become frozen to the metal base of the feeder. She flaps again and tugs it loose, leaving behind tiny green-tinged and grey-tipped white feathers. Unbelievably, though, her wingtip has become wedged between two red metal flower petals. It is far too fragile for me to remove, and when she stops struggling, I can only prod her belly again and again. She finally angles her wingtip just right, tugs and it slips free.

I put the feeder down just inside the door. A few feathers are still stuck to it, one is on the rug and others drift about the hardwood floor. I am suddenly grateful for the snow that kept me home and Sally's call that kept me looking out at our back deck instead of working in the kitchen on our turkey while this poor little bird flipped and fluttered, stuck and hanging upside-down from our perilous perch. She would never have lasted long at nineteen-degrees. If a few lost feathers are her only injuries, she is lucky.

Though she is free now, she just sits in my hands—maybe still too cold, maybe in shock. Perhaps warming her again will help. I close the towel around her, cupping her in my hands. She is so light, like a penny, and each time she stirs it is so faint, like moth wings against the towel. I open the towel up and, before I even draw a single breath, my little Anna's hummingbird buzzes off, up and over the snowy deck railing toward the arborvitaes. Just like that, she is gone.

I kneel there with the cold in my face long enough to feel it fighting the sun and, then, to wonder if it is really the other way around—if it is the sun that fights the cold—or if each wrestles the other, inextricably bound in an essential tug-of-war that keeps this world in its teeter between existence and non. I drop the towel beside the feeder, close the door to shut out the cold and go make our turkey.

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