

EMOTIONAL SELF-REGULATION, WITH BIRDS AND GIFTED CHILD

poem by Sean Kelbley

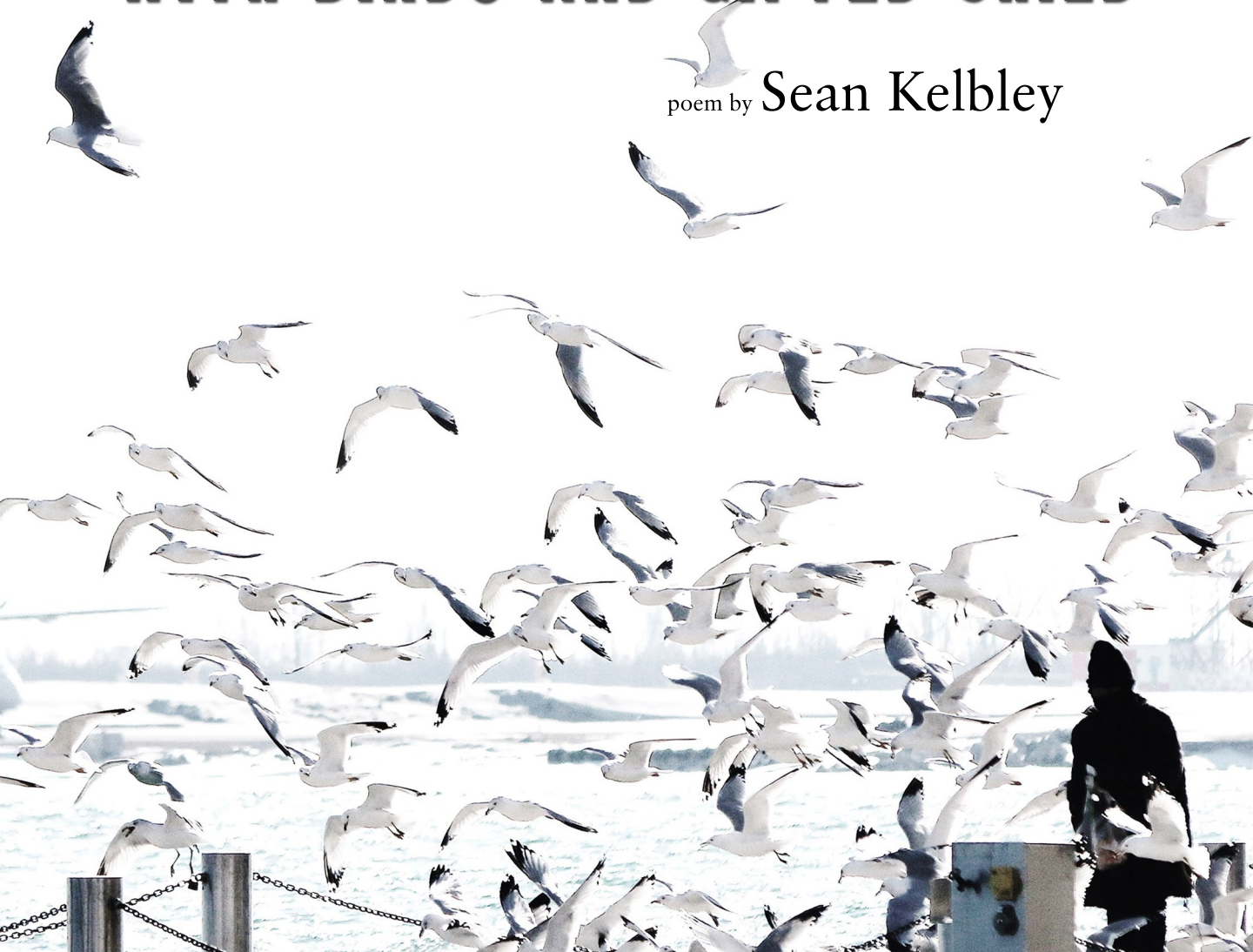


Image: “Dark Figures” by Matthew King. “Emotional Self-Regulation, with Birds and Gifted Child” was written by Sean Kelbley for *Rattle*’s Ekphrastic Challenge, January 2022, and selected as the Artist’s Choice.

It’s called Vacation in Your Head,
but first the teacher makes him visit

hers. “Give me a big thumbs-up
when you have figured where I am”

she sing-songs, and the boy knows
it will be *mundane*, someplace

pedestrian. “Oh! I feel sunshine
on my face, and water licking

at my feet.” The boy cannot believe
how long it takes his class to realize

they’re at the beach. “I hear seagulls!
I smell hotdogs grilling: yum!” And

since he has to wait, inside his head
the boy becomes a seagull—no,

a *Steller’s Eagle*—swooping,
shitting on the teacher’s cookout buns

and every kid that ever laughed
at his vocabulary. “That’s correct,”

the teacher says. “I’m at the beach!
Where would you go, if your body

had Big Feelings?” The eagle wheels

and shits especially on Braxton Griggs,
then wings to Maine, feathers lofting

like the pages of a dictionary. It’s nice
to be the biggest bird. He synchs his

breathing with the ocean’s waves.
From far away, a voice asks

“Where are you vacationing?”
“The beach,” a seagull cries, and then

another seagull cries “the beach,”
and all the seagulls cry “the beach!”

“*The beach*,” the boy says, opening
his eyes to brown Nebraska. But

in his head it’s snowing, hard.
Against the rules he pulls his hood up,

ducks and turns, so no one notices
his sharp *resplendent* beak.