

Crows' Flight

by Chris Galvin

The lake, rimmed with trees in fading autumn finery, looks like a painting of a landscape. Perfect. Not a whisper of wind. The only movement the fattened crows; their lift-off is heavy, yet easy they glide, wing-tips angled up, feet hanging down. Always ready to scoop up a prize: a mouse or a bauble.

Their voices transport me to my grandparents' farm on a summer morning. I am picking raspberries. Moving up and down the long, prickly rows, filling wooden pint-baskets. Popping berries into my mouth and tasting the sun on a cloudy day. My grandmother is inside, setting out baskets of berries in the front room, for sale. The sky is the colour of steel, then granite. Silence. The air is still.

Suddenly the crows call. They are circling above the trees, above the lightning rod spires with their white ceramic spheres, up on the tin roof. Near ones call and distant ones answer, like echoes. Their voices are raucous, but their flapping wings make no sound. They are the only things moving. Then the swirling wind comes and the trees dance. The crows are agitated, cawing louder, frantic now. The wind rocks me on my heels. It lifts my long hair in an eddy around my head. I know I should run to the house, but I stand still, spellbound. I remember my father's stories about storms in the countryside, about the time they were milking cows in the barn; rain pounding, thunder cracking continually and a fireball of lightning shot in through the barn's front doors and straight on out through the back. It singed a cow's tail on the way by. Now, the odour of ozone fills the air. The crows fall silent and I run up the steps, exhilarated. The screen door bangs shut behind me and the downpour comes.

Sometimes, the crows' calls bring me back to a cloudy day in a park at the bottom of a hill near my house. A crow perches on the crossbar of the swing set, watching, his head cocked to one side and then to the other. Black eyes, black feathers, black beak. I run to the slide, clatter up the ladder. The crow settles on the high curving

bars at the top of the steps, just as I slide down. I run to the spinning merry-go-round, jump on beside my friend. The crow circles, banks, lands on the grass two feet away. My friend squeals. "Look, he's following you". She leaps off the turning platform, staggers as she lands, and runs towards the road. Turns back suddenly, pigtails whipping around and across her face. "Are you coming?"

The crow flaps heavily behind us as we flee up the street. Feints at my head. "Run!" cries my friend. Claws scrabble at my scalp, tangle in my hair. Half laughing, half screaming, we run towards my house. The crow is not afraid of me. It wants me for a playmate. I am scared, but I also feel proud. I think I can commune with birds. The crow is as big as my head - no, bigger. It catches the baubles of my hair-tie up in its beak, pulls them, tugs harder. Tries to make off with the treasure. We reach my front door just as my mother opens it to see what all the fuss is about. Neighbours run across the lawn to help chase the bird, but it has already flown away.

The next day, the crow is at the park, waiting. But I am not wearing baubles. It tilts its head, eyeing me for a moment, before it disappears into the underbrush. I am disappointed that it has lost interest in me. Later, my mother finds out that it is a pet crow from the agricultural college nearby.

If you are nasty to a crow, it will somehow pass this on to its children, and they to theirs, and all of them will call harshly and swoop at your head when they see you. One evening, a scientist on *The Nature of Things* states what I already suspected: crows remember faces. He demonstrates by donning a mask. It is the same one worn by researchers three years before, while attaching bands to crows, to keep track of them and observe them over time. Now, when the scientist wears it, the crows become anxious, flying above his head and scolding. When he removes the mask or wears a different one, the birds lose interest and settle onto branches in the trees.

A friend often throws bread to the crows that perch in her trees, despite the protests of her neighbours. One sweltering day, we

stretch out in the shade of a giant maple, while her cat prowls the yard. Suddenly, a stray dog bursts in through a hole in the fence. Snarling and baring its teeth, it corners the cat, which hunches against the shed, hissing. Half a dozen crows plummet from the maple, their strident calls splitting the air. As their black wings brush the dog's head, it cowers, allowing the cat to run past it and into the house. The dog slinks away through the same hole it entered by. The crows, successful in protecting our realm, return to their roost. My friend and I are amazed that they have rescued her cat.

People rarely have something good to say about these birds. The collective noun we use to describe a group of them could not be more unpleasant: a murder of crows. Still, I like their bold behaviour and admire their intelligence. They are one of the few animals that make and use tools. Their ability to remember is astonishing. And I love how they call to each other when a storm is coming.

