

The Crows of India

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I Hearing Crows

The cries crack the dawn of my first day in India.

Kraaaa! Kraaaa! Kraaaa! Kraaaa! Kraaaa!

dissonant hymnal as the night orbits to day.

Kraaaa! kraaaa! kraaaa! the strident cry stains

the morning stillness, black slivers of wings

darting here and there seeking a level of air,

kraaaa! kraaa! kraaa! kraaa! kraaaa!

a raucous unremitting outcry rising

to the pale sky from the trees of Lodi Garden.

We see more crows later as we drive around.

We don't hear them as much as on that first

dawn in Delhi. They're out at first light,

swarming the rooftops, twos or threes swiping

the sweaty riksha man's shoulder, the pakora vendor,

the seller of flowers, the raggedy saddhu in a trance

by a roadside ashram. They are a black litter

on the red earth in Madurai, black missiles

sweeping over the saltbeds, the coco palms,

the young pines along the road to Pondicherry.

In Chenai they adorned the spires of St. Thomas's Cathedral.

Rows of them sit on taut electric wires strung

pole to pole along the highway, they roost on trees,

stray on pavement, grass, sandy beaches

littered with fishbones and snails.

They sit in wait for the ofal we throw to dogs,
cats, the sacred temple mice, the monkeys
they grub on the narrow ledges of our parsimony.
One fine morning, while eating breakfast
on the patio of Peerless Hotel, we welcome one
to our table. He blinks a wary eye at the toast
we offer him, snatching it quick and soaring away
with the tidbit in his beak.

II Feeding Crows

We take to saving crumbs from our plate
—a bit of bone, a bite of meat, a piece of bread,
some basmati rice we wrap in paper napkins
and smuggle in our pockets for when
we go out to the streets where they wait,
perched hopefully on fences, scanning the scene
for any morsel that may escape the stingy hoard.
They are not choosy, anything that beak can break
or claw carry away is crows' food.
They'd pick the eyes out of any carrion,
dog or prince, proffered by brahmin hands
or by a casteless unknown, food all the same.
Unscrupulous, indiscriminate, pragmatic, proud,
ungrateful, too, if you wish, taking what they want,
what they need, and damn if they care who
they're getting it from, or how.

In the park at Panjim in Goa, we scatter grain
on the pathway beside the Mondavi estuary
where the flocks abound. They drop from the low trees
to the ground to claim the bounty, leaving nothing
for the hungry dogs sniffing for their share at a distance.
We are their momentary godlings, giving largesse
from shallow pockets. How well the crows know it,
fluttering back to their perches, forgetting that very instant

the hands that filled their crop. Back in their perches,
they sit and wait, who knows for what else?
Crows never fly alone. They keep within one another's
line of vision. The flock is their indubitable destiny.
They claim an aerial ghetto reserved For Crows Only.

Except for food, I warrant they must be
totally without intention when they kill or steal,
utterly, sublimely innocent, blameless, and pure
as they are meant to be, and hence,
efficient for each moment's deeds.

III Crows Waiting

Waiting, that's what they know best how to do.
But not, like Moses, one imagines, waiting
for a voice in the wild to tell him where, or what,
his flock must go, or do, waiting for a light in the sky
to show what's false or true, right or wrong,
evil and good in the nature of things. Crows do not wait
for a sword-and-sceptre bearing King to come
and win a future, an idea which, surely, does not exist
in crow language. *Kraaa! Kraaa! Kraaa!* their entire repertoire
of speech, enough for what they need to say to one another,
or to hear. Beyond the need to feed and breed,
there are only the streets and open fields
where crows may hunt for mice or find a mate.

It must be hard for them in winter,
no food for days on end, no shelter, what with the trees
unleaving. Cold and hungry, crows drop from the sky
as frozen meat. (Would they eat their kind? I don't
want to know.) Just like that, they become
metaphor supreme for mass murder and death.
We say of such events in human history,
"They died like crows." My Lai, Auschwitz,
and dangerously close to home, Ampatuan.

We see the last of India's crows in Mumbai,
in the Dadar district, where humans
greatly outnumber them, large restless flocks
around the Gate of India, fighting the doves
for popcorn, peanuts, and pakora crumbs.
When at last the plane lifts off for home
we laugh to each other, "Not a feather
in the luggage, make sure," grateful that
we're going home at last, unscathed, light-handed,
as empty as when we came. Not so, of course.
We're wrong there. We're not really rid of them,
we know, in fact, we're never going to be rid of them.

IV Home with Crows

Back to my own flock now, in the land of my birth,
the crows find me again. How they found me,
I might know—they came as weightless baggage
in the mind. They visit at night, one sits on the pillow
near my ear, another perches on my right big toe.
They talk to me thoughtfully in the global language
of their tribe, "*Kraaa, kraaa, kraaa, kraaa!*"
It means nothing. Then again, maybe it does,
something, everything important to their kind—
to feed, to breed in season, flock, flock together—
your salvation and your end, and then, to die
in the frost of winter when death comes easy to crows.
Well, also to humans, think of that,
though humans may think otherwise.
Tough crow wisdom. Believe....