

A Murder of Crows Sit Watching

Sarayah Villasenor

Across the street, there is a murder of crows that pick bits and bobbles out of the dumpster in my neighbor's driveway. The weather has refused to remain static: 50 one day, negative 3 the next, causing a dull throb to ebb and flow through my brain. The runoff from the previously melted snow is now freezing into annoying ice patches that are too difficult to see when walking home. Everything around me is slush and muck, so I stay inside and sit in my sunroom with a blanket wrapped around my shoulders. My neighbors keep the apartment complex unbearably warm and since my window screens are all broken or ripped or gone, I sit out here a few minutes every day to get some relief.

I contemplate walking across the street to feed them, but I don't have the right shoes on and my coat is all the way inside my stifling bedroom. There's always a bag of blueberries in my coat pocket just in case I see the crows on my morning walk to the bus stop. I read on a blog somewhere that crows like berries and blueberries are the only kind I have. Crows are scavengers, they'll eat almost everything. That's how they got that name: murder of crows. Ages ago, crows used to circle battlefields and pick at the remains of fallen soldiers. People used to think that they would carry the souls of the dead to paradise, the metaphorical Charons of the physical world. Somewhere along the way, their meaning was muddled, turned sour and dark.

Sometimes, when I am walking, I toss a handful of squished blueberries and watch as they flock to the pavement and eat them within seconds. It's small, my handful of blueberries, but it is all I can give. Sometimes it feels like they caw at me, as if to say "Hello," or "How are you?" I want them to see me and see through me to every nerve ending and blood vessel and bring me tiny shiny trinkets that say I know you. I see you.

Crows have excellent memories and can remember the faces of the people they meet, and I am oh so jealous, because I can't remember if I ate dinner last night or when the flowers in my kitchen have wilted and dried or the last time I opened my mouth to speak. But when the crows gather around me and I look down to see a penny at my feet, I'm reminded that I am in fact real.

Crows talk and crows remember and crows like giving gifts. Out here in New Hampshire, I feel paper thin, like a gust of wind could tear through me at any given moment. Like someone could touch my shoulder and their hand would come away covered in blood and a million little cuts. It's quiet and lonely and so much colder than ever I thought it could be. When the absence of my friends and family back in Illinois hits me like a freight train and I cannot get this weight off of my chest, I remember the penny and how these crows see me and it makes me feel a bit better. We don't really know why crows do this. Scientists cannot just go up to a bird and ask why it left this penny on my porch or why it left an earring a few days prior. So there's nothing I can do but be mystified by the tiny bones and bits of lost jewelry that are gifted to me by these large birds, and who am I to complain. To the crows, this cloak of invisibility I wear doesn't exist. My inability to wave high to the people I pass on the street or in class doesn't matter. The crows don't think I'm a ghost, drifting in and out of existence. To them, I am a person with flesh and blood and an audible heartbeat. A person worthy of a penny. It makes me think they love me.

They sit, perched on the lid of the dumpster, cawing at one another and I cannot help but wonder if they are a family. The two biggest might be the father and mother and I like to think the smaller one of the group is their child. Crows mate for life, mostly, so it seems likely that they're a family. They've got an odd sort of familial connection that isn't often associated with these harbingers of death and bad times to come. Their feathers shine under the watery sunlight hues of purple and blue and green. I think that's what I loved most about them, the way the darkness of their

feathers give way for so much beauty and change under the afternoon sun. Crows have a terrifying sense of beauty about them that I envy to my core. When the light hits their feathers just right, you cannot help but admire the way the colors dance across their backs. And I think that's truly all I want, to be admired, like a painting hanging in the Louvre — temperature controlled and kept hidden away from the elements that do nothing but erode.

My fingers start to numb from the biting winter cold as I sit and watch them flap their wings at each other and poke their noses through garbage bag after garbage bag. I'm reminded that the strings that tie my friends and I together have thinned, even more so between my family and I. Being over 1,000 miles away from each other will do that I suppose, but when I had first made the move to New Hampshire, I didn't expect the waning phone calls and sparse text messages to cut me as deeply as they did, as they still do. I miss sitting with my friends around a warm, roaring bonfire, tossing peanuts to the crows that watched over us. We didn't feed them enough to allow their brains the time they needed in order to recognize us, so we were never given any tiny shiny bits of bone or other treasures lost in the world around them.

I go back inside to grab my blueberry-filled jacket and toss on a pair of sneakers so I can feed them. Consistency is key. So I will keep tossing these ravenous birds handfuls of blueberries for as long as I can because I want to make them feel seen in the same way they make me feel seen. I want them to know how much I care about them, how much joy they've brought me during these cold months. In Illinois, looking out my window brought about a sort of pain, a desperation and anxiety that I was never quite able to stomach. I thought packing my bags and leaving for the East Coast would help, but it didn't. That undulating pit stayed with me day and night — until I looked down at my feet and saw that sparkling penny resting on my doorstep. It isn't so bad out here.