

Poe (The Crow)

Josephina Wieczorek-Bettendorf

We found it on the side of the bike path—my siblings and I. To this day, only God knows who the original crow-finder was. I remember my feet pushing the stiff pedals on my pink beach cruiser, working to the rhythm of heavy breaths.

“A baby bird!” a little voice cried out.

“A crow!” another added, matter-of-factly.

“Everybody, stay calm,” an exasperated adult warned.

We explained the tragic scene in a dissonance of high-pitched proclamations. I—to the horror of my stepfather—let my new bike fall to the pavement and reached desperately for what seemed to be the corpse of some lovely, dark creature.

(It was not dead.)

The crow had a lame foot and wing, but childlike life swirled and jumped from its eyes. They were black, but not beady. Now and then, it gave its wings a careful shake and let its head twist mechanically from side to side; these simple acts seemed like the crow’s full capacity for motion. We children thought the injuries resulted from some failure in aviation. Perhaps the crow, hungry for the same summer skies we were, jumped the nest before its wings could make a covenant with the air around them.

(The truth is that dysfunctional nestlings are thrown from the tree by their mother. Knowing the baby will not likely survive, she disregards them in favor of the healthier, more dependable offspring.)

Why nurse a child who will never mean more than a surplus mouth? Why raise your predator's next meal? Some may count it injustice, some mercy. Our mother named the frail creature Poe. Its own mother, I'm sure, did not bother with such a ceremony.

"I have a pet crow at my house," I told my classmates with arrogant joy on Monday morning, dull crayons in hand.

"A pet crow? Where did you get it?" replied the pig-tailed girl across from me.

"I found it hurt by the bike path. I'm taking care of it until it can fly again." At this final declaration, a whistle-toothed smile fled from my lips. "Bird-savior" would be a handsome new title.

At home, that night, I stood outside of my stepbrother's bedroom, watching the creature in its newly leased shoebox home. The bedroom entrance, a repurposed patio door, was made entirely of windows. I could see my mother bobbing to and fro behind the wooden grilles, dressing the crow's wounds and feeding him bites of water-mushed meal when the opportunity arose.

"Why did we name it Poe?" I asked. The name reeked of grandparents. Babies were not called "Poe."

"Because of the poem," my mother explained simply. I scrunched up my nose in a scowling reply. I had no interest in old people's poetry, and Poe was not a raven. As my mother finished her work, I stepped closer to admire the beast, using two fingers to stroke his freshly cleaned feathers. How marvelous it felt to nurture something that usually ran away—how special to be trusted.

In a way, I felt glad that Poe was not healthy like his brothers and sisters. Healthy birds are prideful. Healthy birds cannot be saved.

Every day after school I would ask my mother, "Is Poe getting better?"

"He's getting better," she would affirm tenderly.

Eventually, Poe found a melody in his chirps, and his feather shaking became more memory than sight reading. We moved him outside to our garden. There, Poe lived under an oak tree. The ground was shaded, and the leaves overhead grew sparse enough that kaleidoscoped

sunspots twirled across his dark eyes as we sat with him. The wind blew sweetly upon the tree's star-shaped leaves, leading them in a gentle ballet. Despite him still being lame in foot and feather, the crow's spirit thrived. Maybe, I thought, the mind healed first. I grew fond of the dirt beside his little box, sitting cross-legged there in the afternoons, watching as he wondered at the world around him or tested his incapable steps. I cooed to him gently the way my mother did when I had a bad cold, and I wondered if he liked it here, too.

"Do you miss your mother, Poe?"

(I could not imagine that I would miss mine if she ever flung me from the rooftop. But, then again, I might have started to once dinner time came and the California winds grew cold with the nighttime.)

He did not reply, but, as I sat in that cool dirt, I heard an answer in his eyes. They didn't dance, childlike, anymore. Instead, they pooled with deep intelligence, as if they held a treasury of secrets and still hungered for more.

(I don't imagine eyes like that, grown-up eyes, ever miss their mother.)

One late afternoon, I skipped out to the garden to meet my mom by Poe's box.

(I wish I had not.)

Before I reached the cool dirt or the dancing leaves, I watched Poe die. He lay in his box, seizing. His feathers shook loose, filled with a hauntingly still tension, and then shook again. His body hit the cardboard like a sickening metronome.

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(*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

Shhhhh.)

That weekend, I sat with my father at a table in a restaurant I do not recall.

"Our crow died," I admitted. "I guess we couldn't save him."

"I'm sorry," my father replied, a bit halfheartedly.

"Me too. He was a good crow."

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