

North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

They come every afternoon now to the winterstripped oak woods behind the house. Crows.

Hundreds and hundreds of them from all points of the compass. Raucous. Wheeling. Windblown. Careening. Soaring like cinders, settling like stones.

The great black birds are drawn to this Stonehenge of a place even as the Druids have always been drawn to the Magical Circle.

It is awesome to see so many of the glistening scavengers assembled together. Hundreds of them, talking all at once, exchange the day's intelligence—the small talk and the large lessons. Then only a few talking, synthesize the experiences into bite-size chunks the troop can handle. Then no birds talking at all, save the air-traffic controllers dispatching in impressive, constant flights the manageable squadrons that melt away the chaotic mass.

The crows leave this staging area silence—total eerie silence.

One moment the trees are full of birds—a forest of surreal Christmas trees—and in the next few instants every single bird has fled, sworn to secrecy, sworn to stealth. The whole unbelievable flock *vanished*, a million primary feathers making no more sound than one.

The crows spend their days cleaning up after us. They poke and pick through our garbage, and they probably know us better than anyone knows us—unless, perhaps, you figure in the cockroaches and the rats and the CIA.

I don't know what the crows talk about in their conclaves—their daily conferences—but they seem to be thriving, and they seem to be on the increase.

As they settle into the naked trees in the freezing twilight, I think of Jurgen Herbst recalling his boyhood in Germany, "when the East wind blew across the plains and the crows came back to town."

"Nietzsche knew that too," Jurgen observed, "and he wrote a poem to remind us. I send you a copy and add my own translation...."

The poem was titled "Vereinsamt"—"Deserted":

*Cawing crows,
their wings awhir, are moving towards
town.*

*Soon it will snow —
Blessed he who still lives in his home.*

*Now you stand still,
look backward, aye, for oh so long!
What made you fool
winters ago, escape into the world?*

*The world—a gate
to a thousand deserts, mute and cold.
Whoever lost
What you have lost, will stop nowhere.*

*Now you stand tall,
to wintry wanderings condemned
like smoke
that always stretches towards colder skies.*

*Flee, bird, and croak
your desert-bird lament!
And hide, you fool,
your bleeding heart in ice and scorn!*

*Cawing crows,
their wings awhir, are moving towards
town.*

*Soon it will snow —
Cursed he who does not have a home.*

With the words of Nietzsche in your eyes and the cries of crows in your ears, the images pinwheel in the mind's eye like a kaleidoscope twirled in front of the Christmas tree:

*There is Lillian Lawson's English class at West Allis Central, docile as pigeons, listening to a voice that could belong to Poe himself, yet seemingly belonging to the gentle teacher. A voice perching above us all like some great terrifying knowledge.

*There is the snow-covered gravel pit up at the Big Stone Lake in the days we dumped garbage there and stalked the ravens with the scoped .22. In the white sheets, we fancied ourselves Finnish ski troopers at Lake Ladoga, invisible and fooling the Russian bear but not the North Country bird.

*There is the Chippewa from Minnesota, Gerald Vizenor, blowing on his fingertips and recalling:

*"Seven woodland crows stayed all winter
this year among the white earth trees...tribal
land all wire marked...fox runs under rusting
plows...seven woodland crows stayed all
winter this year marking the dead landmen
who ran the woodland out of breath...."*

Loren Eiseley writes of falling asleep at a pond's edge once and waking to find a mature heron poised over him:

"It was certain that momentarily he did not recognize me for a man. Perhaps he was merely curious. Perhaps it was only my little brown eye in the mud that he wanted. As this thought penetrated my sleeping brain, I rolled, quick as a frog shrieking underfoot, into the water. The great bird, probably as startled as I, rose and beat steadily off into the wind, his long legs folded gracefully behind him."

Perhaps that is the uneasiness we have in the presence of crows and ravens and the burial birds. They, too, wait for our eyes. And yet, in the same instant, we know intuitively that Robert Frost was right when he said:

*The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree
Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.*