

Knocks

I woke long before sunrise this morning. I'm at my writing desk earlier than usual. The sun, which has just risen, is still hidden behind a row of cedars. Direct sunlight won't stream through the window and blanch the computer screen for another hour yet.

The crows woke me. For the last month a murder of chatty crows has encamped on the dogwoods, hawthorns, and cedars just north of the house. One of the crows has had a running argument with his image in the glass door leading to the deck. A repeated WHHAANG, a sound like a hammer against an unbraced plank, rings out whenever he leaps at his image. I usually manage to sleep through the morning cawing sessions, but the knock on the door drags me into wakefulness. It is a serious game the crow plays. When I get up to confront the knocker, the fleeing bird leaves behind saliva and blood on the glass.

Of all the birds, ravens and crows are the ones who most enjoy watching us. They seem to inhabit a mutual space, giving and getting in equal shares with their human cousins. At one time we thought them so much our match that we accused them of filching our stored food and damaging our crops. Their walk along the ground has an uncanny human gait. When it rains, the crows get the same bedraggled look that many mammals do. A group of crows can make up complex games, a trait they share with us and our chimp and porpoise cousins. Crows and their raven cousins, to no surprise, are totem animals in native North American societies.

My favorite aunt died alone in a trailer in California in 1990. Toward the end of her life, driven close to madness by diabetes and depression, she would phone her children, who lived many states away, and ramble on about her fear of a "knock on the door." Her children didn't know what she meant by the phrase, but my mother did. Mom wasn't even ten when her older sister, who had just turned eighteen, had an affair with a local farmer and became pregnant. The family hid the compromised daughter from public view. She was taken out of school and put to work on an isolated farm. Whenever visitors came to the farm, the girl and her swelling abdomen would be banished to the back field until the company left. A few weeks before her term arrived, an older brother and her father cranked up the Model T—this was the late 1920s—and spirited her away to a distant city to check her into a home for unwed mothers. After the baby arrived, she surrendered it to an orphanage and returned home from what the family called "a long visit." This aunt later married and had four other children whom she cherished. But at the end of her life the beginning came back. She feared the return of the child she had abandoned to the orphanage more than she hoped for a visit from the children she had kept. She dreaded the knock at the door, the family face of the accuser, the secret revealed.

We have lived in this house five years. I don't know why the crows have chosen this year to begin their knocking. But I lie in bed these summer mornings thinking about it. Like any knock, it is a summons for my presence, a call to face my lovers, my accusers. It was a call I used to fear more than I do now. Perhaps I had more secrets to be kept. These mornings the call finds in me an anticipation for the present. Diane Ackerman says that

In rare moments of deep play, we can lay aside our sense of self, shed time's continuum, ignore pain, and sit quietly in the absolute present, watching the world's ordinary miracles.... All one feels is affectionate curiosity for the whole bustling enterprise of creation.

That is close to what I feel when the knock comes. An affectionate curiosity. In this respect I am not like my aunt. Brother crow knocks and a door in me opens to what the present offers. I stand in the opening and scan the crowd for the familiar face.