One crow, sorrow

Simone Poirier-Bures

Something moved in the grass at the edge of the road. Black against bright green. A young crow. It fanned its wings as I approached and tried to scurry into the tall weeds. A fledgling pushed out of the nest too soon, perhaps? Its tail feathers looked rumpled, mangled. My first impulse was rescue: I would bring it home, nurse it, maybe keep it as a pet.

It resisted at first, so I spoke to it softly. When I picked it up, it stared at me sideways, the way birds do, with a dark, purplish-grey eye. Then it curled a foot around my little finger - it felt like the grasp of a baby’s hand. We were more than a mile from my house, so we began walking. The crow made half-hearted struggling movements, but after a few moments it settled its throat against my hands, so I could feel the warm thud of its pulse. It smelled, oddly, of wet dog. What had happened? Most likely it had been struck by a car, misjudging the speed of some roaring machine hurtling itself down this busy road. I thought of the things a young crow would need to learn to survive in this world. Velocity. Who was a friend? Who wasn't?

I tried to imagine how the crow must feel, being carried like this. It could hear the usual sounds - the chirping of other birds, the soft swishing of the leaves and pine branches, the distant bark of a dog. But the feel of my hands around it, the sound of my breathing, were alien sensations. I thought of rabbits and rodents being borne away by a hawk or an owl. For them such flights always end in death. Crows fly, so what could being carried mean to it? It could not imagine its own death in the way that humans do, though animals and birds clearly sense danger and know fear. This crow, however, seemed to be practicing Zen. Resting serenely, breathing low and steadily, it seemed ready to accept whatever befell it. Now and then it blinked, its veiled eye turning milky blue.

I thought of many things during the 20 minutes I carried the crow. But mostly, I felt its presence, the satiny feel of its feathers, the pulse
of its warm life. I felt privileged to be on such intimate terms with a creature who had never before been touched by a human, who experienced the world in a completely different way than I did, and who now rested peacefully in my hands.

As we entered my garage, the crow tensed, gripping my finger more tightly. I placed it gently in a laundry basket with a pan of water, and covered the basket with a screen. Because the crow was agitated now, I draped an old table cloth over the basket, the way people cover a parrot's cage, to calm it. I thought of bringing it food, but what did crows eat? I knew about carrion, but couldn't imagine myself scraping the remains of dead things off the road. What else? Worms? Corn?

My husband, I was sure, would know. When he came home, an hour or so later, we lifted the cloth. The crow partly opened its wings—the basket was too narrow for its full wingspread—and stared at us warily. The water in the pan had turned bloody, as had a small pool on the bottom of the basket. Blood dripped slowly from the crow's hindquarters. This startled me, as the crow had not bled earlier. Perhaps the way I'd held it had kept the wound closed.

My husband looked at the crow and shook his head. There was nothing we could do for it. I picked up the crow and looked into its purplish-grey eye, into its tiny black pupil, and told it it was dying. It seemed to know. But it didn't thrash or cry out as humans do in pain, so it was hard to tell if it was suffering; it simply watched us, with that one wary eye. And every three seconds or so a thick drop of dark red blood fell from its body.

Would it be more humane to give it a quick death, I wondered. My husband, who kills and eats fish and wild ducks and the occasional deer, said he couldn't bring himself to kill it. I doubted that I could either. But if we left the crow in the basket and let nature take its course, the crow would die in a strange human enclosure, confused and fearful, unable, even, to stretch its wings. How, then, to give it a good death?
I thought of my own death, what I would want. I would like to feel death come and not fear it. I would have death touch me gently, surrounded by the things and people I love. So I carried the crow out to the field behind our house, down through the tall grasses, to the huge blue spruce. Under the low branches where it was shady and cool, out of easy view of hawks or cats, I smoothed out an area and laid the crow there. It blinked at me and kept very still.

All afternoon I pictured the crow in its sheltered nook under the fragrant branches, among the grasses and wildflowers. From its cool, shady bed it could watch the drifting sunlight, hear the humming of insects, the conversations of birds overhead. And softly, softly, death would come, like a shifting shadow, like dappled light, like wind moving slowly through the trees.

Biography

Simone Poirier-Bures is the author of two books: Candyman (1994), a novel set in her native Nova Scotia, Canada, and That Shining Place (1995), an award-winning memoir of Crete. Simone’s stories and essays have won numerous prizes, and have appeared in more than two dozen literary journals in the United States and Canada as well as in eight anthologies. She is currently working on a book of stories (fiction and personal narratives) about human relationships with animals and the natural world. She teaches in the English Department at Virginia Tech, U.S.