

SARAH MINOR

The Crow in Effigy: A Flip-Book



This started with a smell. It started with me wearing yellow dress pants, holding an I beam in each hand, prying bones from the bottom of the trash can beside my back porch. This started when I bent at a right angle in my teaching clothes and leaned into the liquid wrung from decay. There was a gold skull down there and I wanted it. My favorite sibling had stopped returning my calls. This started because I'd grown solitary and impatient, and no one was there to tell me not to.



Before that, there was heavy drinking. There were biblical interpretations. The emergency room. At first my stepbrother was suffering levels of alcohol withdrawal that some doctors mistook for psychosis. At first they said he was schizophrenic—now they just call him an addict. He filled notepads with tiny handwriting. Then he started doing stand-up, stopped driving, went to rehab twice. The summer before, I had moved away to the desert. Soon after I left home, he started calling me for the first time to talk about books he had read. At that point I knew some of our armature was shifting, but I was too far to see what was happening. I still imagined that he was the one throwing out the line.

“For planting corn, beans, and peas: ‘One for the rook, one for the crow, one to rot, and one to grow.’”

“Crow” is a flexible term in the English language. Scarecrows are human silhouettes, effigies fashioned with noisemakers that stir in the wind. They date back to the first century and mark the long-fraught relationship between humans and crows. Among other things, a scarecrow implies that crows should fear men and not the other way around. A crow rowing against the sky is common almost everywhere. The crow’s silhouette is conspicuous. If you look long enough, it begins to change.



I’m standing up close to the trash bin in a moderate heel, and the smell is incredible. It is rolling, hot-sweet-sour and not at all like garbage or meat but more like a bog smell, or a septic tank, and sometimes it’s even not so bad. It’s the scent of ethyl mercaptan, the chemical by-product of decay. The stink catches inside my nose so that I keep smelling it even after I lean away from the can. In my mind, the scent spirals into a tall green column and draws carrion birds to funnel the air above me. A squirrel in the branches starts to scream, and every minute I grow queasier.



The first time I saw my stepbrother he was sitting across the junior-high band room, draining the spit from his trombone valve onto someone else's foot, and not yet related to me. When we were in seventh grade, our parents met on a blind date, and four months later we were the wedding party. My full attention had just turned to boys who didn't care what girls were for, and then one began sleeping in my house. We were the same year in school from then on. I spent the following five years on mildewy couches with boys who knew more about what girls were for than I did. I remember envying my stepbrother for reading more books and doing more drugs than I was willing to. There was a hard distance between us that began to disperse only after we aged out of divorce visitation—aged out of sleeping, on alternate weekends, in houses where just one of us was claimed.



Two years passed and I moved again, away from the Southwest. When he asked, I told my stepbrother that everything in Appalachia was in reverse. The air was wet and the sun was weak and the green was blinding in September. What was the same were the crows. Crows everywhere are the same except that everywhere, a crow is never only a crow. Myths about the birds developed in every culture where they've lived. Most explain how the crow got its color or its roughened voice. Our stories tell of the sacrifices or punishments the crow weathered to become this way—as if it should have always been another. Researchers at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology say that while these myths tell us very little about the animals they feature, they do say a lot about the peoples who invented them.

