

## Crow and Louis

By Beth Eisen

She found out that she was related to Crow after Louis went to the hospital to die. The phone was ringing as she opened the front door. Out the window, alongside the bird feeder, Crow Broken-Wing turned and looked her in the eye. She didn't know what to do. She had just got home. She hadn't even taken off her coat. She still had on her hat and mittens. Crow Broken-Wing didn't know what to do either. They stood eyeing each other on either side of the window. Frozen, they watched each other. She let the machine pick up.

There was a hole in the thumb of her right hand mitten. Slipping her thumb in and out of the hole, she stood near the table and stared out the window. In. Crow Broken-Wing stood ground with a mangled right wing. Out. Crow Broken-Wing, dragging the wing behind, fresh blood on black feathers, edged around the perimeter of seeds scattered by the other birds. In. She watched Crow Broken-Wing eat. Out. Crow Broken-Wing left dragging the useless wing over the dirty corn-snow of spring.

My grandfather would have said, "There's a corn-thief on the corn-snow."

Corn-thief. Corn-snow. My ancestors needed the corn crop for survival; their world revolved around a core of corn. They didn't see a bird eat for

survival, they saw a thief steal their food, destroy their life. They looked at the spring snow which had frozen and thawed and refrozen into pellets and they saw corn kernels. Corn-snow, that's what my ancestors saw, that's what they said. They knew that to name is to give form. We name what we love. Love creates life. That is my pen. This is my desire.

*Crow family, Corvidae (CORE-vih-dee); from Lat. Corvus, raven. 18 species, ravens, crows, jays, bird-of-paradise, rooke, bell-magpies, drongos, orioles, choughs, jackdaws, magpies (contraction of Middle English name, magot pie).*

She saw Crow Broken-Wing hop from the ground to a low cedar branch to a higher one and disappear in the green as the machine clicked on.

Auntie's voice quavered out of the box, "Your father's in St. Andrew's. It's serious."

She picked up the receiver. "Under my bird feeder I've got a crow with one wing almost torn off."

"Must of hit a high tension wire. Someone will eat it. There's a reason they're called bird feeders."

She could hear a precocious girl in an old movie saying, "This bird couldn't fly. This bird had run out of places to go." But the girl in the movie would be

talking about her brother or some guy with his tongue hanging out, not Crow Broken-Wing.

*Sexes are outwardly alike in the Crow Family or nearly so, the nostrils are usually concealed by dense tufts of stiff feathers and they have rictal bristles (about mouth), see Feathers, see Peaterson (1969).*

“Call your cousin and get him to come down and put it out of its misery.”

“I was thinking of rehabilitation, Auntie.”

“I’d do it myself but it’s against the law nowadays. Out of season. He might have a license.”

“There’s a season on crows?”

“Spring and Fall. Only the males.”

“How do...?”

Auntie laughed, “I’m joshing with you. I don’t have a bird gun anymore. Too many laws and rules. This blamed Social Work Lady came to the house.

Paperwork on your grandmother. What a bother. ‘Do you have insurance?’

‘Does anyone in the house abuse alcohol?’ I almost said, ‘Social Work Lsdy, it’s none of your business. I wouldn’t tell you if there was.’ But I said politely,

‘We’re a family of teetotalers, always have been.’ At which point your

Grandmother pipes up, she hasn’t said a word this whole time, mind you, she

pipes up, 'Your father took a drink sometimes.' She throws that in. Social Work Lady looks at me as if I'm the storyteller. I said, 'Mother, Daddy's been dead 31 years.'

She was 6 when granddad died. She remembered Louis saying Grandpa had gone to heaven, which was like earth only better, with no death, sadness or disease. Her little sister wanted to know if there was snow in heaven. Louis said, "No, it's never cold." Later when he found them crying about being forced to live an eternity without snow, he said he would ask the priest about it.

*The family is believed to have originated in the north temperate and tropical parts of the Old World, and to have spread from there to present ranges in N. America and other parts of the world; their fossils have been discovered in deposits laid down in Ohio 12 million years ago (Babcock, 1970).*

"You should have your father's moose gun. He won't be needing it."

"The Winchester? Mom sold it when I was twelve."

"She brought it over here. Your father..." Auntie paused. "He was depressed."

"He was depressed my whole life," she tried to sound matter-of-fact.

"Your mother was afraid he'd hurt himself."

Silence.

“He is your father.”

“I’m not going,” she hung up the phone and got out the bird book.

*Offer a cripple or injured crow various traffic-killed animals, soaked grain, fruit, meal worms and other insects, also mice (Waltman, 1934).*

She stopped reading long enough to put on her coat, hat and mittens, and to go outside and scatter dried corn under the cedar tree where she’d last seen crow.

When she came back she picked up the book. She fell asleep reading the book with her coat on. She didn’t go to the hospital.

That night she dreamed of a car contest, 50 dollars down and a 50 word essay could win her a car. She wrote on Change, how Change was her way, she praised the difficulty of Change, she embraced the inevitability of Change. She spent 50 hard-earned words. It was a used car.

She woke with her fingers bent from the weight of the bird book still in her hands. She could barely move her hand. Then she remembered Crow Broken-Wing. She didn’t see him when she looked out the window. Her fingers ached. Just when she had decided he had died in the night he appeared. But he wasn’t dragging the useless wing over the snow. The wing was gone. Crow Broken

Wing had become Crow One-Wing overnight.

She contemplated the cost of self-preservation as she ate her corn flakes.

*Members of the crow family are mimics—imitating the cry of a child, whine of a dog, squawk of a hen, vroom of the lawn mower, and, in captivity imitate simple spoken words and human laughter. (See also LANGUAGE.) However, the myth that splitting the tongue allows the crow to talk better is a cruel hoax (Coldwater, 1967).*

She took one more look at Crow One-Wing before she put on her coat and mittens.

The nurse directed her to a bed. In the bed asleep was a tiny old man with skin like plastic bags from the supermarket. She stood over the bed. With the light from the window behind her, she cast a huge shadow over the man-child in the bed.

For one instant the morning light tumbling through the window in the present fell away into the past, like a light falling through a hall door on a child in a bed, the shadow covering the child, the child falling away in the dark, the darkness falling over the child frozen on the other side of the light like a deer frozen in a beam of light. Louis jacked deer with lights at night and she was the deer. It was

like walking into a hologram. If she tipped her head slightly she saw the man-child on the bed under her adult shadow, to the other side, the shadow of the hunter loomed over her child-self on the bed.

*Experiments with captive American crows show that they can count up to three or four, are good at solving puzzles and at performing astonishing feats of memory (Coborn, 1911), see also Goodbent (1967).*

She wondered what they had done with Louis. This old man, shrunken to the size of a child, didn't have the strength to lift his hand against anyone, not even his own child. She tipped her head back and forth for a few times trying to see the real picture, trying to find center. After a while she gave up and sat down in the orange plastic chair by the bed and waited for the vertigo to pass.

She tried to recall the curses she'd come to recite. But all she could feel was the hard plastic chair digging into her shoulder blades. She remembered childhood bath times. Her mother would touch her shoulder blades and call them angel wings. Angel wings. She had waited all her life for them to grow larger, but they never had. She was sure now they never would grow. She'd live with wing stumps on her back for the rest of her life.

The man-child with the plastic skin slept in the bed marked with Louis' name.

Louis never showed up, not even when she said, “see you later, alligator.” Like Isaac blessing Esau she finished his side of the litany, “After awhile, crocodile.”

I wanted things to turn out good for her. She was a friend of mine.

*The crow has spectacular aerobatic flights in which pairs dive to earth like falcons or turn over and over in series of somersaults; sometimes they circle for hours like eagles (Banger, 1942).*

The phone was ringing as she opened the door.

She didn't even take off her coat, walked in the front door, stood near the table, stared ahead out the window, and looked it in the eye. She had the feeling it had been waiting for awhile, waiting for her to come home.

She picked up the phone before the machine clicked on; she still had on her mittens as the nurse on the other end of the line informed her that her father had “passed away.”

She stared hard into the bird's eyes as she hung up.

Hawk, sitting on top of the bird feeder, returned her stare. It fixed its eye on her. Then flew away. That's when she knew that she, too, was corn for Hawk. That's when she found out she was related to Crow.



