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1590 words

The Witch and the Crows

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

There are no words to capture the infinite depth of crowiness in the crow's flight.
Ted Hughes

Orenda was bent over her magical herb patch trying to pluck away weeds when her concentration was broken by a cacophony of harsh calls coming from the skies above. She looked up, craning her neck and hoping not to find what her eyes disappointingly confirmed: a murder of crows, rapidly moving black shades set against the fluffy clouds.

The witch scowled, and her withered face reflected her profound loathing of the birds. She had some room in her affections for most living beings, large and small, peaceful and predatory; crows, however, were disgusting creatures that managed to survive through cunning despite the enmity of virtually everyone else.

Crows devoured all forms of vegetable life and preyed on those animals that were smaller or weaker than themselves; they befouled indiscriminately every surface over which they flew or in which they landed; they showed up in large numbers, disrupting the peace and upsetting man and beast alike. Most annoyingly, they were very clever and eluded all measures to scare them away.

Orenda had attempted to protect the herbs and shrubs she grew by placing netting around the rows of plantings, and inserting some lavender, garlic, and citronella bushes, for crows disliked their smells. None of these measures worked. The crows would station themselves on nearby trees and would wait out the witch; when Orenda turned her back, crows would crowd into her garden, cut through the netting, and peck away at the tender stalks and leaves, ignoring the plants that were supposed to repel them.

Next, Orenda tried to keep the crows away by blocking the airspace above her property. She cast a spell that created an invisible barrier high above ground that kept birds and other flying objects from passing over her hut. This strategy gave rise to two problems: first, it prevented passage by friendly birds and impeded Orenda's travel by air during her rounds; also, it did not serve to prevent invasions by crows, who adapted quickly to the situation by flying close to the ground, below the tree canopy, proving themselves again to be ingenious if malevolent creatures.

Orenda tried another way of keeping the crows away from her plantings by erecting scarecrows, which she sought to make more impressive by using magic to infuse the dummies with a range of threatening motions with their limbs and heads. Several crows recoiled in fear at first, but heckling from others in their company encouraged them, and then a host of other crows, to fly over and around the planted figures, sit on the scarecrows' heads, and defecate noisily on the figures before proceeding to devastate the crops.

A different type of scarecrow -- a plastic owl with a crow attached to its talons -- also proved ineffective. The owl was mounted on a weather vane, and gyrated randomly with the wind; it operated until it was attacked by a host of crows, which pecked and tore away at the device, dismantling it.

Orenda was not a compassionate soul and concluded that she had to do something drastic about the crows. Besides their annoyance, their plundering of her herb plantings was making it hard for Orenda to make essential oils for candles and ritual tools, assemble potpourri or sachets, prepare magical potions, and collect items required to cast spells. She had to get rid of the crows, one way or another, and would not mind it a bit if they all died.

With those thoughts in mind, Orenda raised a notch in the fight, from deterrence to extermination. She set poisoned lures on the ground among and around the rows of planted herbs. A single crow was sent out experimentally to eat one of the morsels of meat that had been placed by Orenda. The crow ate the poisoned bit, convulsed, keeled over, and died. The other crows mourned the deceased but reacted to the sacrifice of their companion by ignoring Orenda's remaining lures.

At this point, Orenda realized she was in a difficult war against an enemy that matched her in persistence and cunning. She decided that she must do what humans had repeatedly tried to do in similar circumstances: negotiate a way out of her predicament.

Negotiation, of course, requires some form of communication. Crows are great communicators. They have dozens of vocalizations they use to send messages to each other, the most common is the cawing sound, which conveys location information to other members of a flock, warns of potential threats, and asserts territorial boundaries. Another vocalization is rattling, a rapid series of short, staccato sounds used to challenge or to signal danger. And there is clicking, a softer and more subtle vocalization that crows use to convey specific messages to one another. And so on.

Orenda had no time or disposition to learn the specifics of the crows' complex communication system. She opted, therefore, for a more direct approach: she entered the mind of a crow foraging nearby and began displaying simple images indicative of her thoughts.

[Orenda]: (Image of a fleeing owl) ##Not enemy##(Image of a white field) (Image of a crow flying serenely) ##Friend## (Image of a green field)

[Crow]: (Image of Orenda's face) (Image of a fleeing owl) ##Not enemy?## (Image of a white field)

[Orenda]: ##Friend## (Image of a green field) (Image of a very large, powerful looking crow) ## (Boss?)##

[Crow]: (Image of a different, large, older looking crow) ##Boss##

[Orenda]: (Image of a crow flying) (Image of the older looking crow) ##Bring?## (Image of a blue field).

[Crow]: (Series of images superimposed on one another) ##Confusion##

[Orenda]: (Repeats message)

[Crow]: ##Confusion##

[Orenda]: (Repeats message, adding: (Image of her face) (Image of older looking crow) ##Talk## (Orenda caws, trying to imitate crow's call)

[Crow]: (Image of crow flying fast) ##Get him## (Image of a red field)

The crow flew away, returning later accompanied by the older crow and three others.

It took some time for a communication protocol to be established. The old crow, who Orenda dubbed Skink because of the pictures of small lizards the crow flashed to underscore his food predilections, was a self-important creature that let Orenda know he had lived through

“many” mating seasons, had fathered “many” birds, and was the head of a murder comprising “many” crows of all ages. (Skink could not count past eight, the number of toes on both his legs; anything greater than eight was “many.”) Skink indicated that he and the other crows in his murder were unhappy with the things Orenda had done to attempt getting rid of them, and expressed the firm conviction that crows were smarter than humans like Orenda and would defeat all attempts she made to dislodge them.

Orenda listened patiently to Skink’s braggadocio and then managed to convey the following thought: ##Wouldn’t it be better if they could reach a solution that was good for all?##

Skink moved its head up and down slowly, signifying a potential agreement.

After some bargaining, Orenda and Skink agreed to the following deal: She would prepare, and provide daily, enough porridge to feed the members of Skink’s murder. In return, Skink and his acolytes would refrain from feasting on Orenda’s crops and would keep away any foreign crows that attempted to feed within the bounds of Orenda’s property. It was a simple enough agreement, but its success depended on observance of its provisions by all parties.

It worked for a while, and then both sides became dissatisfied. The crows were omnivorous and relished everything that was edible, and soon got tired of a monotonous diet of porridge and began to look covetously at Orenda’s herbs and other plants, which were growing within a striking distance. Orenda, for her part, became weary of having to cook a big batch of porridge early each morning, serve it in two large vats, and clean up the mess (including droppings) that the crows left after they ate.

Orenda decided to spice up the next batch of porridge by adding ground up berries of the poisonous deadly nightshade, which she had gathered the night before. At dawn the following

morning, Skink led a raid of very hungry crows in an invasion of Orenda's garden, where they feasted on everything that was standing. When breakfast time came, both Orenda and the crows were presented with unpleasant surprises. The crows, notwithstanding their earlier feast, devoured the poisoned porridge and soon dropped to the ground in agony. Orenda watched their death throes with glee, but her enjoyment was short lived, for a few minutes later she went to tend to her garden and found it destroyed.

Other witches, attracted by psychic distress signals emanating from Orenda's hut, came to its vicinity and were appalled by the sight of seventeen crows of all sizes and ages, dead or dying at the clearing before the hut. Inside, Orenda was found in a state of hysteria, shrieking at the loss of a lifetime's worth of magical gardening.

When a full understanding of the distressing situation was gained by the other witches, it was decided that Orenda would have to be expelled from the coven. She appeared demented and had committed a serious act of violence. One of the visitors summed up the group's reaction to what had transpired: "There was fault on both sides, and both deserved punishment; nonetheless, in an orderly world, wanton retribution must not be permitted."

Orenda gave up herb gardening and retired from the dark arts to lead the life of a private citizen. Crows, however, still avoid the vicinity of her hut.

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