

raven

for paul tennant

They were trying to cheer me up, as they could see the fragility of my jokes. If I was that funny I must be in bad shape. Merle was full of something about songbirds that she had seen on the internet, and Corbin had to tell me about a theory that was supposed to connect with avian perceptual skills and some mystery about the differences between species. All very technical, but then they wanted to draw me out of my amusing shell and pin me down with details. I wasn't sure I could stand it, but I let them go on. After all, they're very old and very good friends, pedantic trivia-grinding fact merchants though they are.

It was all about birds, their shared obsession. Shared to shreds, I said. But they didn't even notice all the birds around my house. There was a jay on the feeder and two towhees perched on a nearby branch waiting for the jay to leave. As usual there was a little gang of ravens half way up the giant douglas fir by the road. Corbin weighed in first. He had a long story about how birds see different colours to us so that birds that we can't tell apart look like completely different species to them. Like if martians couldn't tell some people from jackasses I said, but he didn't get it. Merle wouldn't let him finish because she was so full of what she had been reading, that if you had tiny ears like birds you would hear higher sounds, and apparently they've taken bird songs and lowered the pitches, so robins sound like Benny Goodman and thrushes sound like Scarlatti, something along those lines. I asked them if ravens turned into hip-hop or seagulls into Bjork. I don't like seagulls. They thought I was serious, so they got worried when I said that they couldn't both be right, because if they were all different species than

we've been thinking we wouldn't be able to map them onto music like this. We'd need the real bird species and not the ones we have been mistakenly using. After a while they got the point and began arguing with each other. Merle remembered how she had mistaken a crowd of nesting herons for a disco. Corbin insisted that since he could call owls by imitating their cries they were hearing the same thing as he heard. And they'd been such a nice cozy couple. I watched them walking down the drive, trying to sort it out, while I poured myself a drink.

At the end of the glass I had a revelation. The two ideas were not opposed. They go together nicely. If birds can see different colours then it makes sense that they can hear different sounds. So perhaps ravens and seagulls don't sound so awful to one other. I had another drink and thought about it some more. I decided to ask the ravens. They'd know.

Although you can see the top half of the fir tree, where the ravens hang out, from the house, to get to it you have to take a path through dense overhanging cedar branches, that winds and dips until it gets there. There's something confusing about it; you lose track of which direction you are going, and the darkness is so abrupt that you feel afraid. There is often the grating conversation of the ravens to make it more ominous. They do seem to be saying something, something you can't understand and wouldn't like if you could. Walking along that path is a little like falling asleep and beginning to dream. As I started along it I found myself remembering a time years earlier. I had found a baby raven on the ground near the base of the tree. A nestling with most of its feathers but not enough to fly up to where it came from. I had never been that close to a raven chick before and I was struck by how this one's baby feathers were quite different from adult feathers. The light was dim and flickering as the breeze moved the thick canopy of branches above us, and in it the chick seemed iridescent, as starlings look in

bright sunlight, somehow shimmering though not at all bright or shiny.

I sat by the chick and watched it, moving to head it off once when it seemed to be wandering into the bushes, and talking softly to it in what I thought might be soothing to a baby raven. I saw an adult headed for the nest and I gave it a good caw. What I thought was a good caw, anyway. The adult zoomed down and I retreated down into the dark path, knowing how aggressive ravens can be in defence of their young. I watched from a safe distance as the adult -- mother, father, uncle, sibling? -- hopped around the chick and seemed to chat to it. An hour later another raven came down. The first raven flew off, and I went back to the house. From the house I could hear the comings and goings and conferences of the ravens for the next forty eight hours. Several times I went stealthily down the path to check on them. I could hear the ravens talking to the chick, and also the chick's voice. You know how things sound different when you hear them through other sounds. Like how music goes sour when someone is whistling. Or wine when there is toothpaste in your mouth. The chick sounded different from the adults. Softer and higher, since after all it was a lot smaller. But it had a tune, a melody that was songbird-like and raven-like at the same time. Once I went down there at night. There were shafts of moonlight filtering through the branches, and the adults were talking softly to the young one. I tried to see if it still had the shimmering quality and at first I couldn't see it at all. Then I found my attention being shaped by the caws of the adults. If I looked with the rhythm of the caws, focusing on where I knew the young one was, as the sound got most grating, I saw a little spark of - blueish orange? - I can't really say what it was, but it was vivid - just at that spot. And each time I saw those glints, the cawings sounded different. Like someone running their finger down a string of a cello.

Two days later I didn't hear anything down there, so I went all the way to the

tree. Carefully, prepared to retreat if attacked, and prepared to find a dead chick. There was no one there. I hoped that the chick had developed enough in those two days to fly off. Though it beats me why I should care for one of those foul-mouthed, aggressive, nest-robbing barbarians. I shrugged and went home. I picked up one tiny glittering feather, but when I got it back home I could see that it was an ordinary small raven feather that had got bleached by the sun.

All that was years ago, though it was dimly in my mind as I went down the path towards the fir tree, following its windings into the canopy in the rapidly fading light. By the time I got to the fir the sun was setting and red streaks between a network of dark clouds were the only light spots in the sky. There were no ravens. But I did feel I would learn something from them if they appeared, so I sat down to wait. It was getting cold, but luckily I had my hip flask with me, and a few sips of brandy made it more comfortable. They didn't arrive, and I couldn't hear them, so I stood up to leave.

By now it was completely dark, and I was not completely steady. I took a couple of steps and bumped into a branch. The path must be the other direction, so I turned quickly. And slipped. Before I could recover I was on the ground, and my ankle was twisted beneath me. It hurt. I tried to stand, but I couldn't except by grabbing a branch to haul myself up. So I sat down at the base of the fir and waited for morning.

The moon rose soon after. I watched for a while as it appeared and disappeared through the clouds. It isn't often you have a good reason just to sit and pay attention to something beautiful. A flutter: I was aware of something, or rather someone, on the ground beside me. A large raven stood motionless not a yard away, as if also watching the moon. We spent hours like that. Sometimes I was looking at the moon and sometimes at the

raven. I tried one of my caws and it responded. I listened for the cello string sound among the raspings and, somehow prompted by the moonlight, my ear finally found it. As I heard it I had a glimpse, just a tiny fleeting transient glimpse, of a dark shiny colour. Not orange, not purple. I can't say exactly what.