

# *The Castle* 🏰

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## **The Song of the Crow**

You were once a beauty.

Like fluttering geisha, you adorned painted silks and danced like a rainbow in the clouds.

Your voices rang out as sonorous as bells

and all who heard your song marveled at its melliflence.

Now your silk like feathers have been stained sooty black.

Your voice burned with smoke and ash.

Was it a jealous God of prophecy who painted your white purity black?

Was it man's fire who burned your sweet voice and stained your rainbow finery?

You are bad luck. Everyone avoids a murder of crows.

Murder, you are associated with horror movies and misfortune.

No one remembers your beauty,

No one remembers your deeds,

No one remembers your story.

You are compared to an ape, though you have no fingers,



You are intelligent and it is said that you can talk.

Do you talk to me from your telephone wire?

Do you speak of my death, O bird of prophecy,

Will you whisper my fate to me?

You eat anything, you are an “opportunistic eater”,

Will you devour my flesh when I am rotting in the ground?

Will you nip off my nose like your cousin the black bird?

Or will you hold a funeral for me like your dear fellows?

Will you sit and sing at my wake, lamenting my demise?

You will hold grudges for generations.

Will you ever forgive the scarecrow that sits in the field,

Keeping you from gorging yourself on corn and grain?

Or will you hold that grudge in your heart and scold the straw man,

Pecking at his burlap cheeks and button eyes, forever resenting the messenger.

You were once a messenger, you sang of prophecy and delivered news.

Until your God sent you out and you looked upon the betrayal of his lover.

You came back with singing of misfortune, and he did not forgive you for shame.

You were the messenger, the unfortunate one to deliver the bad news,

So he painted your white wings black, and stained them in his grief.

Now you sing only of ill omens, lost love, and the tidings of mortality.

You were once admired for your colors, for your voice.

You sang better than any nightingale and were more regal than any Peacock.

Until pale hands reached for you and asked for a miracle,

Up you flew to the heavens and then down you descended with fire in your beak,

But the fire scorched your voice and dulled your brilliant wings with soot.

Man had fire but you had lost your magnificence.

The Creator took pity on you and bled light into your feathers,

So your rainbow could still shine under the sun.

You are forgotten.

You are remembered.

You are ill-omen and messenger.

You are savior and sacrifice.

Your voice no longer sings,

But your wings still hold a rainbow.

Sing of misfortune.

Sing of death.

Sing of glad tidings.

Sing of your beauty.

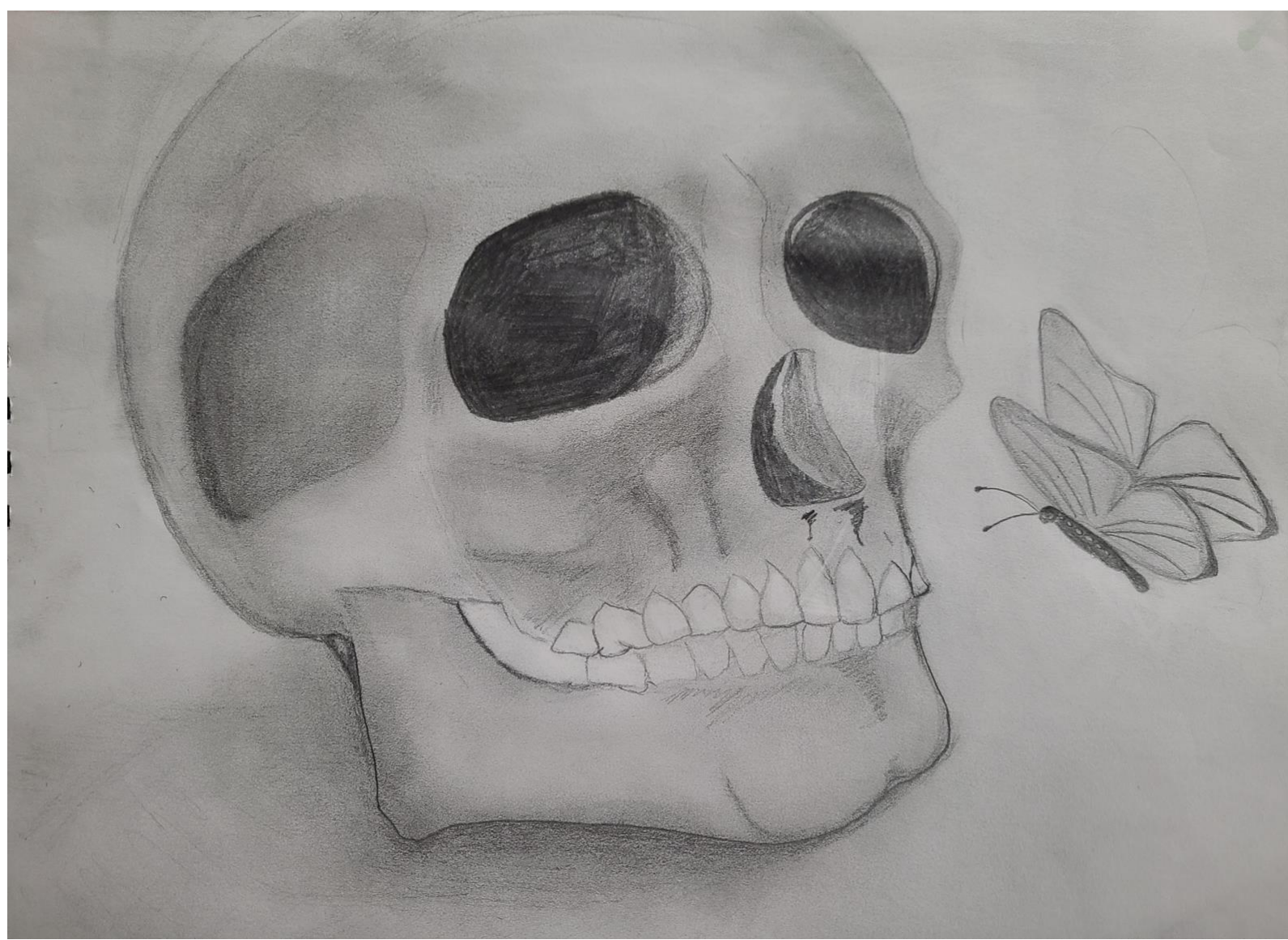
Sing of your fate.

Sing of the Crows and the song they sing, as they sit on that telephone wire.

## What Makes My Heart Beat



**Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder**





**Daffodil**

New growth sprouts from hollowed sockets.

Green sprouts twist,

emerging from the black depths.

White petals sit on bleached bone,

blooming from within.

Flowers bloom and entwine in the emptiness.

Rebirth begins as life grows from death.

**Amaranth**

A red vibrancy sprawls across the Earth,

long after our bones turn to ash,

long after the sun sets,

long after the moon ceases to pull the tides.

Eternity is long for this red-blooded flower.

## World Standing Still

The turtle story happened in the spring after my mother died of ovarian cancer. She'd died in Michigan, where I was born—and now I was in Iowa, where I'd moved a decade earlier after living in Michigan my whole life. The morning of the turtle, I left the house to go to the car wash. I drove down a four-lane street that has a 35 mph speed limit that people often ignore. In the right-most lane, I saw a giant snapping turtle, slowly making his way across the road. Males generally have thicker and longer tails, and he was so big—his shell spanned over a foot wide.

Off to the right was a huge golf course that the turtle must have spent days crossing. Now he was likely heading to a small lake that lay just a mile off to the west. I stopped my car and put on the hazards. I signaled for cars to stop or slow down. I didn't know what else to do—so I grabbed a rubber floor mat from my car, thinking I could pick him up and be protected if he tried to snap me.

His dinosaur head was focused straight ahead—as if he could already see the lake. He was gray as a boulder, and caked with dirt. As I tried to take in his magnificent shell, ankylosaur tail, and his surprisingly delicate claws, I heard a group of men's voices yelling at me from the golf course: "Grab him by the tail!"

They repeated the phrase over and over until I finally grabbed the tail and hoisted the turtle up. He was lighter than I had expected. Instinctively I tried to continue across the street in the direction of where the turtle had been heading—but the men were shouting with greater urgency: "No! Other way!"

They were gesturing wildly, impatiently, still holding their golf clubs. I hesitated because it didn't make sense—the turtle needed to keep going. But I halted as traffic had picked up, and turned toward the golf course.

“Watch your legs!” the men yelled, even though the turtle was not trying to snap me. I walked several feet away from the road, set the turtle down in the grass, and hurried back to my car. I was rattled and just wanted to get out of there. I was relieved and pleased with myself for having stopped and helped this animal, and I drove away hoping that the turtle would be okay, somehow.

Twenty minutes later, my car all washed, I headed home, returning by way of that same street. When I came upon the spot where the turtle had been, I saw his battered body, along with fragments of shell, lying in the exact same place where I had seen him crossing the first time.

I was too shocked to stop. I drove home. I told Bob about it—and he said, “Well, you did what you could.”

I avoided that street for two days. In the meantime the weather had warmed. I kept thinking about the turtle, hoping that by now someone had removed his body. I regularly removed animal carcasses from the road and placed them on grass or under a tree. Why hadn't I done it this time?

I couldn't stop thinking about the turtle, and I couldn't sleep. I finally drove by the spot again. I saw the same fragments of shell, and now, mangled black flesh pushed up against the curb. It was clear that people had just driven over the body repeatedly for three days.

For three more days I drove by that spot, trying to figure out how I could reconcile what responsibility I bore for the turtle's death. My husband Bob had tried to assure me that he would have died anyway, no matter if I'd come along or not.

Another day went by. I passed the turtle's body once more. The pieces of shell were still there. It was the turtle's foot, that intact ancient paw, that had brought me to my knees. It was one part of the animal that had not been mutilated beyond recognition. In that paw, I saw something that broke my heart into pieces.

The turtle's arm and paw were reaching for the sky, rising above the mess of the rest of the turtle's body.

That paw, juxtaposed with the rush of traffic, and the awareness that since my botched rescue attempt, not one person seemed to notice, nor care, that this magnificent being had died there, and worse, the awareness that I had for nearly a week tried to put it all out of my mind, left me numb with grief, and what I can only describe now as shame. But it wasn't only grief, or guilt, or even shame. I felt haunted.

The night it was hot, humid, the smell of pig shit in the thick air. I had not yet told Bob how I hadn't stopped thinking about it in a week, how I had avoided going by that spot, and how I'd gone back. When I started to cry, he assumed that it was about my mother. Just a month earlier, he had found me in the bathroom, unable to pick myself up off the floor—I didn't want to live anymore. I kept seeing my mother's resigned face, the way she had gently, peacefully accepted her own death, and told me "not to take it to heart."



But on that night I could only see the turtle—and how my attempt to “save” it had been a disaster. The whole story poured out of me. He listened—didn’t say one word until I’d stopped talking.

Then, he asked, “Where is the turtle, exactly?”

I told him.

“Stay here,” he said.

“Where are you going?” I asked, as he got out of bed. But I already knew.

I heard him leave the house, fuss around in the garage, and drive away. It was very quiet and everything was very still—as if the world was holding its breath, or right before a thunderstorm, just as you start to see the lightning in the distance.

After about thirty minutes, I heard him come home. He was sweaty. After his shower, he told me the story. He’d taken a snow shovel. When he’d pulled up to the curb where the remains were, he was amazed by the lack of traffic. He said, “It was perfect, no cars in either direction.”

He’d scooped up the turtle’s shell fragments, what was left of the soft parts of the body, and carried them over to the biggest and bushiest pine tree he could find, out on the golf course. He’d dug a small trench and lay the turtle into it, and covered him up with needles. He said the stench was overwhelming, and that the body was now home to several different kinds of insects. Others had already come and gone. He told me about the strong scent of pine, mixing with the smell of decay and the dewy scent that is specific to the middle of a summer night.

The burial released me, in some ways, so I was able to sleep better that night than I had for at least a week. Something about that gesture made me feel that I could take the experience, all of it, and fold it into my life—make it part of me, take it to heart.

A year later, Bob and I drove back to Michigan to help my stepdad plant a ginkgo tree near my mother's grave. I had started reading Donna Haraway's book, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Haraway explores the question of what kinship can mean as we move closer to extinction. She tells stories that ask what could happen when we dispel the teleological and humanist idea(l)s about genealogy, biology, familial (paternal) blood ties. If we see our potential kin all around us, in trees, animals, the very ground that holds us here. Maybe it isn't about "saving" things—but allowing ourselves to be transformed by our grief, and move toward the things that are dying and disappearing. Maybe a powerful aspect of grief is that we learn something from it that will show us what to evolve into.

My instincts had been correct: when a turtle is trying to cross a road, pick it up by the sides of its shell, and walk it across in the direction that it was trying to go. I told Bob, "I was so stupid. Why didn't I listen to myself? I should have gone with you. I shouldn't have left it to you to deal with."

He shook his head. "No—you didn't. No—that night, the world was standing still for you."

How do we write from a broken heart—from that place where language fails? How do we effectively express our grief about what we witness every day? We want to move, we want justice, we want to take it all away. But we cannot. We cannot stop time, and we cannot go back.

The only way to go deeper, deeper into the world. To fall in love. It is scarier to love. Why? Because that is what we see in the face of the natural world. We see the land's power to heal—but also be beyond healing, beyond poisoned and broken. The message is that there is nowhere to run. Somehow, some way, we need to keep finding ways to connect, or re-connect, with what is here, with what shapes us—and not despite, because perhaps because, it is wounded, and reflects something ruined and thus vulnerable and changing in ourselves. To bear witness to suffering, joy, the miraculous, the humbling, the wondrous. To find the path and head in one direction, slow and steady.