

Crows in Ann Arbor



On Friday, November 27,
At 5:23, high up in the heaven,
A corroboree of crows comes cawing,
Swirling and whirling down,
Cruising and congregating,
Two hundred strong, to meet and greet
At the corner of Hill and South State Street.

WHY!!

Why?

Why. . .

I suppose that no one knows,
Except for crows.

Crows, they say,
Are smart that way.

* * *

The editor didn't cotton to my verse, gave it a rejection,
Noting that I hadn't answered my own question.

And this, he suggested, made the poem all together
Too brief. He seemed to consider it a "small" poem.

Colleague from a familiar department, he claimed
he had hoped someday to publish something
of mine – something, perhaps
simple and true,

an essay or two,
perhaps a review.

But, alas, he said, not this
not this – this not-enough verse.



Something, I guess,
somewhat less
demanding.

He gave me, with compassion I am sure, something to do,
A verse I might read by a well-known poet who

seemed to think the reason for corroborees
was something he knew.

At least he used a particular word
for the flocking of that smaller black bird,

the European starling. The word was “migration,”
which he evidently considered an explanation.

He didn't say why he considered this true,
only implying it had something to do

with philosophy, and people dying,
but not much about crows, or starlings either.



* * *

Is it the case that we should never admit not knowing precisely why a crow is going here or there, or doing this or that, say, in a corroboree? Or that we should never agree that what a crow knows is simply not available, or else is necessarily trivial? The original brief version of my poem about Ann Arbor crows just might be acknowledgment of how little the poet (and the biologist within him) knows. But what is the glory of thinking it's not proper to leave an unknown hanging out there, or proper, for that matter, to insist on an explanation as ridiculously irrelevant as the philosophical views of humans, or of people dying? Not crows dying, but people. The poet may be trying but the crows don't seem to be complaining about it. The ignorance is not trivial, not resolved by creating a human story to pontificate when it's birds not people the poet is seeing without understanding. There is, after all, virtue in acknowledging a truly persistent absence of answers.

And asking crows (or starlings) what no one knows
surely is no easy breeze, especially

not when it's about corroborees.
After all, we've never even tried to speak crow-ese

except for a few forgotten biology doctoral theses.
Nor is it likely we could teach crow sages



to explain to us in one of our languages,
in the way that we, considered to be the genius linguists

of the universe, have tried teaching apes some twists
on human languages, rather than us learning theirs.

It takes real expertise to query chimpanzees
about rampages, or crows about corroborees.

And we've scant reason to believe a bird
could respond to the "why" word

either knowingly or by accident,
comprehending even one subtle variant

of that complex little three-letter term. We
might startle them by asking, "Please,



why not migrate without corroborees?"
"And why corroborees without migrating?"

"And why, after all, in each particular
not-so-fascinating time and place?"

At least we have no cause for believing
that crows have evolved to deny their reasons,

though it's certain that if they were to ask each of us
the why of our own gatherings, we'd surely fuss,

proffering, at best, poor and incomplete explanations,
and, at worst, false and deceptive recitations,

all of these from our own curious species
that invented the concept of corroborees

and that bewitching “Why?” Anthropologists may try,
but they know little more about the massive

imponderable billabong gatherings
of Aborigines in Australia’s northern deserts



corroboree, corrobori, from native *korobra*, dance. 1. a dance festival held at night by Australian aborigines to celebrate tribal victories and similar events. 2. in Australia, (a) a large or noisy festivity; (b) an uproar, tumult – *Webster’s New Universal Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged*, 1976.

“Large or noisy festivity” and “uproar” and “tumult” are likely to be correct because these features of Aboriginal corroborees, as with crow corroborees, can be observed directly and repeatedly, thus also confirmed. But the source of the assertion “to celebrate tribal victories and similar events” is at least doubtful, and almost certainly without adequate evidence – whether from Aborigines or visiting anthropologists. Likewise, the vague phrase, “and similar events,” casts doubt on the entire implication of adequate definition, especially with respect to meaning or function – again, as with crows in Ann Arbor – and, oh, so many others that we would like to understand much better (such as the mockingbird discussed on p. 202ff).

Of course, for animals that cannot talk to us,
and for those who might tell us lies,
we try to discover the whys

by examining their entire beings scientifically.
The language of the search is that of biology:
bio- and -ology as the study of life and not the



curious cover-up definitions tossed about
by philosophers and editors, poets, medical
and social scientists, and a few others:
something indefinite about genes and physiology,
and maybe altered habitat and geography;

innateness, instinctiveness, hard-wiredness,
genetic determination, and all such,

fostering dichotomies that allow users to reject
the parts of us that they believe do not reflect

our nobler traits; nevertheless it is all biology,
learning, sociality, and culture as well as all the rest,
conscious or not, and we need to understand this

to guess wisely about the likes of corroborees.
Hard-wired means only that we do not yet understand
the responsible ontogeny, the how and why of it
being epigenetic.

There's not much surprising about our ignorance
Of development, surely, by far the most complex process
in the entire living universe, and not traced out completely

for even the simplest trait of the simplest organism.
Maybe some day in the distant future we'll comprehend
the completed spans of our lives, beginning-to-end.

It's a complication that we are the only species
that deceives ourselves as well as others. We can't
ask and expect to learn from self-deceivers

and deliberate deceivers the meaning of something
as profound as corroborees. That's why we'll likely
just continue, for the time being, to view crows

primarily as troublesome, like that poet's starlings
on the Fisk campus, poisoned and leaving their splatters
and rotting bodies where some can be convinced it matters,

at least those possessing sufficient sensitivity (or levity)
or maybe anger for some because their foot coverings become
stained from abundances of bird droppings.

We'll keep working on ways to
destroy crows too, that's a certainty,
or move them to somewhere else, seek

ways to break up those campus corroborees.
We'll keep on talking about gatherings of crows
in ways, I suppose, that satisfy us about ourselves

instead. Not ways to exalt them, not ways
of exalting crows themselves, not ways
of comprehending the delicate mysteries

of crows and their corroborees.
In the end we tangle our queries,
returning ourselves to human worries:

the finiteness of personal existences,
the haunted wanderings of souls, in pretenses
or hopes that crows, too, and starlings

and perhaps everyone else, might care about such
if only they could listen, even if they, like most of us,
would never accept some prosaic answer from Darwin's

differential reproduction as making sense
of the mortality that follows from senescence.
And we'll keep on pretending that for ourselves,



for our sociality too. It must be something
else, not some version, some expression
of natural or even sexual or social selection,

saying instead, "Hah! Reproduction!?! Not me!
And nothing, really, to do with corroboree!"
We may like thinking that crows' corroborees

have subsided rather than expanded, from ancient traits
into vestiges from former migrations. That's something we
think we know about, and therefore can be

convinced about, that something residing inside crows
that could explain such apparent anomalies.
Or maybe crow corroborees, as some declare



about vulture roosts, are information centers
concerning such as sex or food, or migratory routes
or something else not yet brought forth.

Perhaps it's just find the fattest or the sexiest ones out there,
and the most enthusiastic colleagues, and chase after them
tomorrow to see where they go and what they do.

But why, again, should corroborees happen only here?
Or there, and not elsewhere? Or why not find a dead deer,
skip the corroboree all together, and remain quietly near?

Oh, yes, deer! They also appear in herds of hundreds
right around here where those crows corroboree.
Are they too accused of migrating, or is it merely that

farmers like the fellow across from the Bridgewater
Bank Tavern leave shelled corn scattered across the
splattered cornfields? Hungry deer, after all, appreciate
shelled corn.

But we seek too often easy, careless answers
that seem to resolve whatever we wish them to,
and something pleasantly far from uglinesses

such as the relentless reproduction of those selfish
genes, at least, in our contented minds, in the ways
ego-driven individuals are sure to indulge.

No Hamiltonian selfish herd of crows, this,
we like to declare safely -- instead,
something nice for the whole group is

what a corroboree ought to be,
rewarding everyone, possibly,
but along with the opportunity, chancing

some down-home, good-feeling status-enhancing.
Like the mere joys of migrating, as if that too
has nothing to do with reproducing;

harmless generalizations we self-deluders erect
that keep us uninformed but self-assured for now.
All of us poets, whether merely aspiring or otherwise,

must settle for wrong, deceptive, or incomplete answers
for crows and starlings and editors and Aboriginals
And deer alike, and return uncertainly to our crossword puzzles.



Evolutionary selection does not flinch from deleting or gently diminishing our memories of the persistence of differential reproduction, making it even more difficult

for would-be analyzers of ornithic performances, held in abeyance for all these centuries, leaving us to philosophize about our human selves instead.



For all we know, crows could be busily changing themselves, Converging on the bilateral kin groups that have enabled us, alone so far, to make our cooperatives large enough

and our lifetimes long enough to manufacture wars. Perhaps, too, they are noisily shifting toward the monogamous biparental families, like some of our own, and right under our noses,

with systems comprising large groups of diverse relatives distinguished individually, as perhaps in all sedentary or flocking-together human primitives -- and in no one else at all.

Crows may have learned with us to behave as if knowing reproduction is not mere counting of babies born, but as well helping all relatives close enough to favor genes common to kindreds.

And knowing in crow sentience that their life lengths are extending -- even doubling -- as in our own case when monogamy and concealed ovulation gave us the wisdom to tend kin preferentially in their expanding groups; and evolving abilities to learn about kin, thereby generating reproductive abilities later in life by helping and saving those late-acting genes.

For some time our best will be to keep on transforming every unanswered crow question into something we like better than the flickering untruths, and curious claims to have addressed it.

Surely we'll repeatedly neglect the troublesome abundance of those wonderfully complicated big black birds, the mysteries of their noisy activities, the magnificence of their corroborees.



We'll repeatedly forget about all of those things that no one knows

-- except for crows.

[YEARS LATER] “CROW MANAGEMENT EFFORTS CONTINUE –”

“The crows have returned! For the past several years, an increasing crow population has congregated on central campus during the late fall and winter months. The birds usually roost overnight in the treetops, then scatter shortly after daybreak. Population counts have been taken around campus and as many as 1100 individual birds have been observed at one time. The entire flock is estimated in excess of 8,000 crows.

“The noise they create, the droppings they leave and the potential for health concerns present significant disturbances to the University community. As a result, the staff in Pest Management has initiated its practices of recent years to attempt to disrupt the flock with mechanical devices so the crows will congregate ‘elsewhere’.

“Pyrotechnic flock disruption is an approved method of the Department of Natural Resources. The pyrotechnics emit loud, siren-like noises and bright lights. It does not cause mortality, only relocation of the target population.

“Please alert your colleagues that they may see and/or hear the pyrotechnic devices used in the early morning or late afternoon hours, particularly in the central campus area. If you are uncertain whether a suspicious noise is related to this effort, don’t hesitate to contact the Department of Public Safety at 763-1131 (or 911 from a campus phone). Questions about the flock disruption effort can be sent to Dale Hodgson, pest management specialist, at daleh@umich.edu.”

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Nothing's resolved, that's certain and sure
But it's plainly no *puny* poem any more.

* * *

A Final Note: Whoever came up with the inglorious term, “murder,” to describe a flock of crows should be caused to suffer an especially miserable fate. Surely he or she had no knowledge whatever of the beautiful and appropriate Australian Aboriginal term, “corroboree.” We should all pledge to change the ugly label of “a murder of crows” to the delightfully alliterative appellation, “a corroboree of crows!” The crows of the world are too handsome, too vocal, and too socially mysterious to be so crudely belittled.

