

The Birds: The Crane Husband

written by Guest Contributor | September 8, 2020



We live in the woods and are visited daily by animals. We used to rush to the windows to take pictures, but by now the deer and rodents feel commonplace, just neighbors cutting through our yard on their way from the adjacent forest to the forest down the street near the lake. They stop at the salad bar, which is what we call the hosta garden, lush in spring, nothing but naked stalks by August. They visit the tavern, which is what we call the small pond where the deer kneel, dip their tongues.

We're no longer proprietary about our land, no longer discouraging. We've stopped collecting hair from salons to sprinkle on the broad leafed plants, a natural repellent not only for the deer but, when we looked outside at the hairy garden, for ourselves. Have at it, we say now. This includes the wildflowers, plantains, creeping Charlie. Grass, someone once told me, is just a weed that became popular. It's also a weed that became needy. Instead of catering to it, we let grow whatever wants to grow, let graze whatever wants to graze.. Our yard is your yard. In fact, you were here first.

This particular spring and summer, while our human neighbors self-isolate, these other neighbors have perhaps begun overstepping. Coyotes come out in the daylight. A fox suns itself on the rock near the house down the road with the chicken coop. Four raccoons, a mother and three kits, toddle out of the woods. The mother is somewhat upright, hunched and flat-footed as she skulks along, but with her front paws held aloft before her. The babies follow, assuming the same comical, human-like posture. It's, as if the mother said, Walk this way, and the little ones understood the joke.

At our place a woodchuck has taken to slithering under the dog's wire pen, lazily eating violets and dandelions as if she's some children's book character, while Josie, an unusually small but nonetheless feisty Westie, howls in frustration behind the glass door. A year ago the woodchuck would have bolted at Josie's threats and keening. Now he glances up, gives the woodchuck equivalent of a shrug, and goes back to the purple and yellow

weeds.

Something's changing. It feels like there's a revolution coming. A cute revolution, but a revolution nonetheless.

Last week two sandhill cranes and their colt came by, strutting into the yard. It was as if they were on vacation from their usual home, the creek a half mile off. It was as if they'd read some brochures and thought, This year—the woods! They toured the area, poking at the bergamot, considering the shed, meandering over to the decimated hostas the way tourists do when encountering ruins.

We've always had hordes of wild turkeys here, those gobbling blue dinosaurs, and a few green hummingbirds, but we've never had cranes, and, because I was home alone when they showed up, I took a few pictures to show my husband. As I aimed the phone's camera, the male crane bugled and charged. Like our doors, the walls of our house are, for the most part, glass, large windows uncurtained, unshaded, and the crane headed straight for the window I stood behind.

I took a step back. I apologized. Sorry for taking your picture without permission, I said as though I was a rare bird myself, the polite paparazzo. The crane wasn't the first animal I've tried to converse with. You should hear me with the dog.

But it turned out the crane wasn't upset with me. It was his own reflection he was coming for. An interloper, a menace, this other male crane. A threat to the female and baby, and he attacked the glass with his blade of a beak, pounding, jackhammering, and the mother took the colt beneath her tremulous wing and she gobbled like a turkey, and Josie came running, barking. It was cacophonous, this war initiated by this crane, and it was impossible not to think of the old Pogo comic strip: We have met the enemy and he is us. Pogo, a possum; we have possums here too.

Later when I tell this story to a friend over FaceTime, because we're both avoiding the world in an attempt to stay healthy, she'll say, Oh, you must have been so worried the crane was going to hurt himself. I wish this was true. The fact is I was worried he'd break our window. I was worried about the mess of it, the expense of it, the invitation it would present to the neighbors I've yet to make peace with: the divebombing moths, the vicious wasps, the relentless mosquitos.

You'd think the proximity of a gesticulating human being and the earsplitting growls of her ferocious little dog might frighten a crane away, but, while this one obviously didn't understand the reflective qualities of glass, he did have a firm grasp on its impermeability. It seemed I needed to go outside to shoo him off. The idea frightened me. I'm not much taller than five feet and he wasn't much shorter. And I had no weapon like that beak. But I braved it, went into the yard, yelling and waving my arms, and he looked at me the way the woodchuck looks at my dog—aware, but who cares—and then he resumed attacking his enemy.

The female and baby did react to me though. They caromed to the right, to the left, then pitched themselves into the bergamot patch where the little one, orange as sunrise, became invisible. The mother's head stuck up above the foliage. Below it, her wings churned, and there was a flurry of hummingbirds and butterflies and bees, feathered wings and finger-nail wings, chirring and flapping and fleeing.

It was then that I saw my husband rush into the room. He still wore his mask and he had a knife. He also had a huge cardboard box, long, the kind skis come in. He sliced its seams open, leaned the flattened cardboard against the large window.

Then it was done. Reflection obliterated, crane family reunited, vacation resumed. The bees, at least, returned to the bergamot.

There is, I suppose, a metaphor here, but I don't know what it is, don't know if it has to do with the foolishness of warfare, the foolishness of self-hatred, or the foolishness of living in the woods without investing in window treatments. I also know that cranes are symbols of long life and good fortune, and I'd like to think one of those things had come knocking on our window—luck or, even better, the end of a pandemic—but I know better than that. The crane wasn't a symbol. The crane was a crane.

I understood this because of who we are, my husband and me. We're those people who follow the news closely, perhaps too closely for their own good. Night after night we watch members of our own species on our TV screen behaving in ways that frighten and infuriate us. We shout at our leaders, at the people who've enabled them. But sometimes, when the sun has set, before we've turned on the lights, we see our reflections in that screen. We, too, have met the enemy. We, too, know who it is.

When we adopted the dog, an unwanted litter runt, her vet told us our most important job was to keep her from being frightened. She's a stalwart little being and not much scares her, but we do take turns holding her through fireworks and thunderstorms. We rock her and she hides her head against us and pretends, to the extent she's able, that it will be all right.

We can't cradle the wildlife. We can only do the smallest things. The cardboard remained in place for several days after the cranes showed up. Then we hung curtains.



Judith Claire Mitchell is the author of two novels, *The Last Day of the War* and *A Reunion of Ghosts*, the latter a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award and the recipient of the Edna Ferber Prize as well as other honors. She is the Dorothy H. Draheim Professor Emerita in English and Creative Writing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where she taught fiction workshops and directed the MFA program.

featured photo by Judith Mitchell