

KNOWING MAGGIE

I don't know you, magpie. I know your corvid cousins. I discovered a valuable lesson some time ago: follow the crows, that's where the action is. (When for reasons of their own, they aren't following you.) I am guessing the same is true of you, Maggie. Can I call you that? No, you're right—too familiar, not yet.

I don't know you, magpie. Our ranges don't overlap. Me in the glacially steamrolled Midwest. You in the folded mountain spines of the Great Basin. But here I am, a temporary visitor on the backside of the Rockies. Here you are.

I do know this: Your Othello flash of black-and-white are too conspicuous, your chatter-wocks too demanding, your plumed tail too extravagant for others not to know you. This provides strange comfort, because I know that the gleam in your feathers must have birthed whole mythologies, sacred story cycles, and trickster reversals that swelled human minds. Perhaps you stole the full moon and tucked her under your wings to carry home, only to have her melt across your breast as you brushed against a warm earth. Perhaps you cheated coyote out of his rabbit bones and he leapt and snatched your fugitive tail in his shiny teeth, stretching those feathers like taffy to profligate lengths. Perhaps you pressed your luck at taming fire and singed your feet while carrying a flaming twig to hapless humans, and so your legs look as though they've been dipped in spruce ink.

Beauty, mischief, and brains, too. Cognitive researchers say you are one of a handful of species that can recognize their own mirror image. Chimpanzees, dolphins, elephants ... magpies. You also mourn fallen kin. Nodding, arranging needles and sticks, dignifying the body.

When I first heard of these vigils, the world gained a new measure of wonder. The line between humans and other animals, two-leggeds and winged ones, became opaque. The ground shifted and we stumbled from second-cousins to immediate family. A darker paradox seized me, though, as I pondered our shared funeral wakes: is the trade-off for greater understanding the ability to suffer? Is the comfort that we do not do so alone?

The cuts of self-awareness make the search for wholeness more painful, inevitable, and in the end, impossible. If I could converse with magpies, I might try to warn you, even though it would be futile. You cannot shift evolutionary trajectories and become a less sentient form of animal being. Consciousness is a genie that cannot be returned to its bottle. Awareness that allows empathy for others creates a certainty: suffering the loss of what is dear to us. That old story about forbidden fruits, a snake, and the first couple relies upon this dramatic centerpiece. The expansion of knowledge makes uninhabitable a blissful garden of simplicity. So we gather together for comfort, hold the edge of the coffin, nod our goodbyes, and dignify the body.

There are those who would look at you, magpie, and see an ominous sign—a tombstone preacher, perched on granite, complaining at the piñon; a trash picker; a seed thief. But all I see is life: a self-aware yin-yang, streaked by cobalt, gliding up an anthracite mesa toward Gothic Mountain. I watch you swoop between cars and strike a confident fencepost pose and I know that between the two of us, you are the one who's got a handle on this strange world. Carry on,

magpie. Go about your business. I hope we meet more frequently—enough so I can call you Maggie.