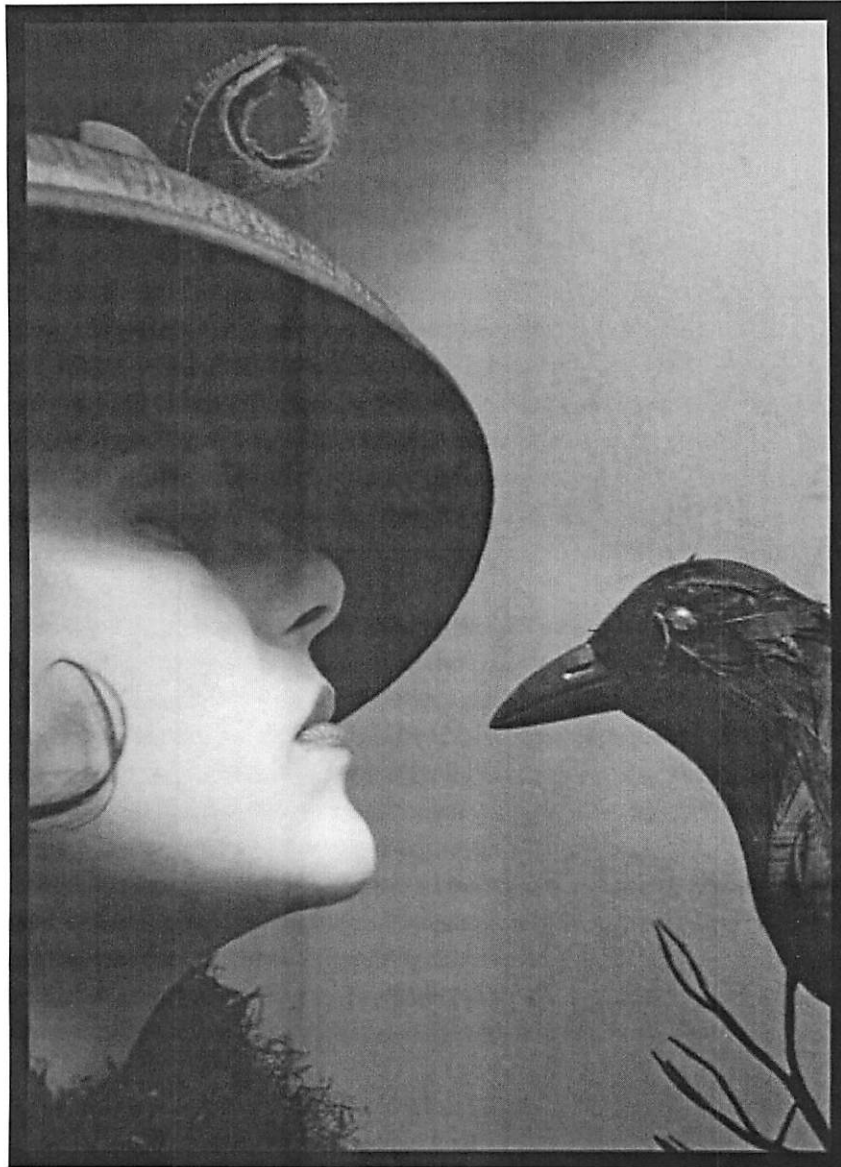


Full Of Crow's Quarterly Fiction

# FULL OF CROW



# Communitas

*by Allen Mendenhall*

The man awoke to the chirping of a bird. He lay listening in his bed for some time before rising, stretching, and gaining the window. He looked outside. The sun had risen; off-white clouds unrolled like scrolls across the horizon; wet grass and tall pines punctuated the land below. Sometimes the man looked out and read the words of the world; sometimes he looked out and read nothing because the world seemed unwritten. "Not for nothing," he said to himself. "Not for nothing."

Sometimes he would see her standing in the yard, working in the garden, pretty as a sunflower. Sometimes he forgot her. She was never there in any case.

The woman was, in her youth, symmetric and vaguely beautiful, like a poem: full of marks and scribbles working in concert, taking on meaning. In recent years she had become, despite herself, an aging monument to womanhood whose rough topography of face showed traces, however faint, of vigor. She had been gone five years, but he thought about her, and about her cool, liquid eyes, on many mornings, especially on the cool mornings when the steady, westward breezes tussled his hair and smelled, to him, like memory; the pain of her leaving was stronger in the mornings than in the afternoons or nights. The earth, the soil, the animals: all were alive, shamelessly, recklessly, gloriously alive then. The stirring of birds and squirrels and the retreat of nighttime critters—raccoons, owls, opossums—inscribed the world with syllables and notes, sang the world to the world, perhaps even to the universe. Something happened in the mornings, something tremendous: the soul, his soul, like leaking ink, bled into the world, stained the world, and he, the man, became an artist, and joined the growing chorus of life.

But the man was not happy. He no longer understood happiness because he could not read it.

This morning was different. He wondered whether it was the music, the tune, the tone. Standing before the window, he closed his eyes and listened to the world and turned his head toward the source of the sounds and then opened his eyes.

There it was.

A redbird.

He stared at the redbird, a stranger to him. He knew the daily visitors to his feeders and birdbaths, knew them as one knows the contours of his hand: mostly bluebirds and robins, but

occasionally finches and sparrows. The redbird, though, was new; its music moved him, drew him out of himself.

The redbird perched on a limb on the old maple tree and turned its beak to the sky, its crimson crest and round black mask both brilliant and threatening. Its little button-eyes were barely visible beneath the mask, but the man thought he saw the redbird looking back at him. He smiled and waved. The redbird bobbed in acknowledgment and then flew off.

The man grew sad.

He gazed as far as he could into the distance: at the brooks and streams meandering down the mountain and terminating into the various fishponds that dimpled the Okmulgee valley. He could just make out the images of trees covering the foothills; yet when he had stood here as a boy, he could see everything, even the neighboring village, south of the mountain. How strange, he thought, that the body grows old.

The man placed his hand before his face and wiggled his wrinkled fingers. He smiled knowing that he controlled these appendages even if they weren't strong or nimble, even if they wouldn't touch the woman again. Then he frowned because the fingers, crusty and bent, seemed separate from him—as if they belonged to a force even greater: God maybe.

It was Monday. The boy would come today.

He was kind, this boy: a hard worker. He showed up on time every Monday and Wednesday to till the land, chop the wood, feed the cows, water the plants. He had been at this routine for two years.

When the boy came, the man was happy.

Over breakfast the man spilled coffee on his beard, which was whiter this year than last. He rose from the table and looked himself over in the mirror and winced, disgusted, when he noticed a brown stain on his matted grass of chin. What would the boy think, the man scolded himself.

He soaked his beard in the sink and applied a towel to the stain, transferring the brown from his chin to the towel and then wringing out the towel until all was white again. He was embarrassed even though no one was watching. He was also worried because the boy was growing.

Two years ago the boy seemed to enjoy working for the man. The boy smiled and talked and sometimes stayed for dinner. Now his visits were short. He was busy with school and sports and girls. At least that's what the man imagined.

The man didn't know the boy's thoughts, but the man knew that old men weren't fun to be around; he knew, too, that he, the man, was no exception. For a time the man pretended he was different, deluded himself into thinking that the boy liked working on the man's farm.

But the man knew better than to pretend, so he made the boy's visits as painless as possible. When the boy knocked on the door in the mornings, the man paid the boy right away. The man didn't wait until the boy finished working. This way the boy wouldn't have to speak to the man more than once each visit. The boy could simply walk home when his work was through.

The man knew that the boy had about one more year of work left in him.

Then the man would be alone again.

And the man would be sad.

The man looked at the clock. The boy was late. The boy had never been late.

Beneath the clock was a box, a present from the boy's family. The man hadn't opened the present because he knew what was inside.

It was a computer.

The man resented the computer because he knew that the boy's family meant it as a replacement for the boy. Everyone knew that one day the boy would stop coming, but the man would have a computer to keep him busy. That's what the boy's family wanted.

The man looked at the clock again. For five minutes he had been staring at the box. He thought that maybe he would open it today. This morning was different, after all, because of the redbird's visit and the boy's tardiness. Maybe it was time for the man to try something new.

He didn't know how computers worked, but he could follow instructions better than most; when he was in the service, officers had hired him as a handyman because he could fix damn-near anything.

"Anything," he said to himself.

Just then the redbird alighted on the windowsill and began to sing. The man looked at it and smiled. He began to sing along. Then his shoulders bounced and his cheeks stretched and his face warmed and he had trouble breathing and before he could panic he realized he was laughing.

He laughed so hard that his eyes watered and he could no longer see. He wiped his face and his hands were wet. He didn't understand what was happening, but he was happy. Then his body relaxed. His face dried. The redbird was gone.

He opened the box. Inside were several pages of instructions. He removed the instructions and followed them one by one, working rigorously. Within an hour he had plugged in and booted up the computer. He had nearly forgotten about the boy when he heard a knock at the door.

"I'm glad you got here 'fore I finished," he said to the boy.

The boy said, over and over, "I'm sorry."

The man told the boy not to worry.

"You're not working outside," the man said. "Not today. I've got work for you in here." He gestured for the boy to come inside.

The boy, uncomfortable, looked back at the fields for a long time before entering the house.

"Who's gonna feed the cows?" the boy asked, wiping mud off his feet.

"I already done it," the man lied. The man decided to deal with the fields at some other time. It wouldn't kill the cows to wait a few hours. Right now he needed the boy to teach him about computers.

The man shepherded the boy to the computer and told the boy to have a seat.

"Ain't you gonna sit, too?" the boy asked, concerned about the man's strength.

"I ain't gonna sit. Back in the war I had to sleep standing up. These legs can handle standing."

"Okay," the boy said. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to teach me everything you know about this computer."

The boy winced. Normally this would have upset the man, but today the man was changed.

For hours the boy explained to the man how the computer worked. The boy demonstrated the computer's various functions and wrote down sundry commands about keyboards and hardware and control units.

The man had not used his telephone for years, so the boy showed the man how to hook the Ethernet cord into the phone line.

The man learned quickly. The more he learned, the more confused he became about certain things, but the boy was always ready with quick instruction.

The boy said something to the man about searching for people on the Internet, and the man grew happy.

"Search?" the man cried out. "For people?" He slapped the boy on the back, laughing once again. "That's it, my boy! I'm fixin' you a drink!"

The man opened a bottle of whiskey, poured one glass for the boy and one glass for himself, and toasted to the computer. The boy, slightly wary, raised his glass and guzzled down the warm

liquor. The boy had never drunk before; he didn't know what the man was thinking; he knew, though, that whiskey made men's chests rumble like thunder; the boy didn't like storms.

The man was thinking about the woman. If the man could search for people on the Internet, he could find the woman and bring her back home—or, he thought, even better, he could, yes, he could do *that*.

The sight of the boy clipped the man's thoughts. The man decided the boy needed to drink more.

The man and the boy drank and drank until the boy saw the clock begin to float around the room. The boy muttered something about the time and stumbled out the front door, zigzagging along the road and disappearing into the night.

The man stood in the doorway, watching the road for a long time.

The man was happy; he had an email address; he knew how to browse the Internet.

The Internet was like a library the likes of which he'd never known. It could teach him about people and places.

Once again he held his hand before his face and wiggled his wrinkled fingers. Now he could feel that they were his. He punched the keys hard and with purpose. He couldn't type worth a damn, but he got faster each minute. He sipped his whiskey and laughed with derision. All of these actions he repeated over and over, moonlight filling up the room. Then all went dark and he awoke the next morning still sitting at his desk.

His head ached and he felt sick. The computer was on and staring at him and inviting him to play. He felt like a boy. He could feel blood rushing to his head. He heard chirping outside and wondered for a moment if the redbird had returned; but he had no time for birds; not this morning. This morning he had to find the woman.

He put his fingers on the keys and went to work.

Weeks went by and the man learned more about the woman. He fell in love with the computer and its seeming omniscience. He emailed a search company, which, in return for a small fee and a list of his information—name, social security number, address—provided him with information on the woman's whereabouts.

The man found a website that gathered data from other websites and that gave him the woman's address and phone number; the man was happy. He was becoming young and fast and proud.

The website showed him the value and square footage of her residence. Then there was a picture of her.

The man examined the picture until he forgot time; he didn't smile or frown; he just looked. He marveled at the woman's high cheekbones and surreptitious smile, her auburn hair and wide forehead. At last, he thought, I've found her.

He turned off the computer; when the screen went black, he saw his reflection. He still had the beard, but he looked healthier. He wondered whether the computer didn't reflect all that was good and happy in him.

The boy had stopped coming, but the man was happy. Perhaps the boy's family had been right after all.

Two days before the man was to set off for the woman, he grew afraid that the boy could get into trouble for showing the man how to use the computer.

But the man felt no guilt or hesitation about what he would do to the woman once he found her.

There was a fine line between harming the woman and harming others, and although he was ready to do the former, he refused to do the latter. If he did something to her, he reasoned, he would violate society's laws, but the woman would be the only victim, and God wouldn't mind. He, the man, would not bring others down with him, however, because he wanted full responsibility and because the boy was a boy.

The man had always hated lawyers; but today he found their websites helpful because he wanted to see if his plans would get the boy into trouble. The man thought for a moment that lawyers weren't bad if he didn't have to meet them face to face.

Navigating through layers and layers of Internet, he read about torts: invasion of privacy, appropriation of name or likeness, false light, public disclosure of private facts. None seemed to implicate the boy, so the man was happy.

The man had thought about what he was going to do and even imagined, right down to the gory details, how the event would play out; but he had not yet called the act what it would be. He thought of a word for it, but that made the act sound official and administrative; that smacked of courtrooms and detectives and police. How unromantic and old and boring; he forced the word out of his head.

At length he grew tired. He was about to shut down the computer when an advertisement popped up on the screen: BOOKS FROM SIBERIA. The man leaned back in his chair and wondered where Siberia was and why this foreign company was advertising to people here in the American countryside and in English no less. He thought that Siberia was in Russia—he was almost sure of it—but it could've been in one of those former Soviet countries whose names he could never remember.

He decided to click on the advertisement to find out, and when he did, his screen flashed red and the words "Napoleon" and "firmament" flickered there and then disappeared; then another icon materialized and said something about a virus.

The boy had warned the man about viruses, but the man had dismissed the boy by saying that viruses were things that other people would get and that he, the man, would not let his computer get sick.

“Dammit,” the man cursed himself; then his computer shut down and his own reflection, there on the blank screen, stared back at him. The man thought for a moment that the computer had its own face and that its face was his and that that face was judging him, mocking him, and that God was in the room, weeping. He slammed his fist on the desk and grew ill.

He decided to go to bed and worry about the virus in the morning.

When he awoke, he was covered in sweat. He felt a sharp pain in his hip; the pain moved around his waist and up his side and felt like a knife slowly and surgically dragged along his ribcage. He tried to cry out in pain, but sound wouldn’t come. He tried to roll over, but he hurt too much to move. He heard knocking on the door and figured it was the boy coming back to work. “Boy,” he tried shouting, “boy, come here.”

But words never issued from his lips. They were buried inside him and couldn’t dig their way out; then he grew scared because he remembered the redbird and realized that the boy was not here and would not come.

The man was alone.

He held his hand before his face and wiggled his wrinkled fingers, but he could hardly focus on the image, and all the time he heard knocking at the door—or was it the floor or the wall or the roof?

His eyes welled up with tears and he felt as though he were looking through a stained glass window: colors and lights between him and the text of the world. He heard the knocking growing louder and thought about how God was punishing him for his sins, so he prayed silently because he couldn’t make noise, and he hoped that everything people said about God was true: that He could hear a person’s thoughts and save a man even on his deathbed.

Then he heard chirping and looked toward the window and there on the windowsill was the redbird, its head cocked sideways like a question-mark. The man tried to wipe the tears from his eyes to get a better view, but by the time he did so the redbird was gone. He squeezed his eyes closed and concentrated on the pain until the pain became words and he fell asleep again.

He awoke two days later. He rose from the bed and waddled to the computer and booted up the system. He felt better, but he sensed that the illness was just beginning. The pain in his ribs had subsided and he was no longer sweating, but his head throbbed.

He couldn’t work because he couldn’t read. The images on the screen seemed to bounce and play like boys. The man, disgusted, pushed his chair back from the desk. He resolved that he didn’t care about the woman or the boy and that he had nothing to hide: God knew everything; neither computer nor fig leaf could change that.



Then a wave of nausea came over him. He vomited.

It was the computer's fault, the man decided. The computer forced him to read beyond words. The boy was gone, the woman was gone, and he, the man, was sick.

The man realized that nobody had fed the cows for weeks, that by now they had either run away or starved. He realized that the flowers had rotted in the sun, and that the crops were dead or dying. Just then he heard the wind wheezing and whining through the windowpane, and he winced at the sound because it reminded him of God. Then the windows were flung open and in flew the redbird. It circled the room three times and came to rest on the man's pillow. The man stood up from his desk, studied the redbird, and moved to shut the window. He would, he decided, trap the redbird inside. As he approached the window, he saw something cresting the hill. It was a speck at first, but as it grew nearer, it took the shape of her, the woman, coming home.

My God, he thought, turning to face the redbird. He was going to speak to the redbird, but when he turned around the redbird was gone. He scanned the room and saw nothing; he listened and heard nothing. It was as if the redbird had never been. Then he turned back around and her face was in the window, her eyes like daggers stabbing into him.

"You're sick," she said. The man clutched his beard and nodded. They stood together, not speaking. The woman shook her head, knowing.

Three states over the boy walked along the sidewalks of a concrete and metallic city, taking in the people and the noises and the traffic. The Internet did it. He was thankful for his freedom and for escaping the Okmulgee valley. No more cows, no more old men, no more empty, sad acreage. The Internet did it. The boy realized that playing the part of the man was easy. He could get things cheaper, faster, and without consequence. He could get credit cards and fake identification. The Internet did it. He could alter the man's birth date and rent cars and buy cigarettes. He didn't have to look like the man or like any old man. He just needed digits.

The boy did not look down as he walked. He just thought of digits and how they were like words but different: sometimes they signified; sometimes they didn't. The boy liked pretending to be digits because he could disappear. He liked blending in with crowds and becoming a number, which, he thought, was all we were to God.

And that made the boy happy.

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