

## The Raven

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I stand alone in the field,  
among the debris of a farmers' market,  
disregarding the heat warning,  
the faint wildfire smoke in the air,  
watching the sun pale in the sky,

when a raven strides over to me and says:  
    Draw white circles around your eyes,  
    chew a pinch of *nzu*,<sup>1</sup>  
    smear your teeth with *ose oji*,<sup>1</sup>  
    and peer into the womb  
    of dreams.

I snort at the raven:  
    Some men engineer dreams that collapse bridges,  
    disfigure homes and blacken rivers.  
    Other dreams despoil communities as though  
    besieged by explorers pursuing new frontiers of gold.  
    Such is the power of dreams that care nothing of earth.

The raven nudges me with her left wing:  
    Dip your left hand then your right  
    in the womb and pry it open.  
    The entrails of dreams bear glimpses  
    of what is to come, what can be birthed anew.

I recall aloud the song my father liked singing:  
    Ala yearns for new yams. *What becomes of the old?*  
    River Urashi longs for new flesh. *What becomes of the old?*  
    The crossroad craves new kola nuts. *What becomes of the old?*

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<sup>1</sup> In Igbo culture, *nzu* and *ose oji* are used in ceremonies and rituals. *Nzu* is an edible clay or chalk that pregnant women sometimes chew and native doctors or *dibia* wear around either one or both eyes. *Ose oji* is also known as alligator pepper and is sometimes served with kola nuts to guests as a token of hospitality.

The delta murmurs about new bones. *What becomes of the old?*

The raven cuts me short with a song my mother used to sing:

That smoke far afield is not grass burning.  
That red in the river is not the dye off clothes.  
That flesh on the shore is not a body of fish.

Consider the crab. Consider its legs.  
Consider the snail. Consider its tentacles.  
Consider the chameleon. Consider its skin.

I pick up when the raven stops singing:

Mother Crow teaches her daughters to eat grass,  
the better to beguile the world of flesh.  
Father Rooster bears his weight on one leg,  
the better to beguile the world of bones.  
Elder Hare has learned to look both ways,  
the better to beguile the world of blood.

The raven nods and says:

Tell your restless children,  
Europe is the rainbow men chase across the dry.  
Europe is the rainbow men chase across the wet.

There is no pot of gold in the rainbow  
Because salvation is the Sahara of bones.

Salvation is the Atlantic of bones  
Because Europe remains the vault of bones.

Smiling, I remind the raven:

Dead bones shall rise again. *Hallelujah!*  
Dead bones shall rise again. *Hallelujah!*

But the raven sighs:

Dead bones shall rise again — but whose bones?