



Gone, Still / Dana Pomeroy

The Cat Raven

// Zacc Dukowitz

It's the night before my LASIK eye surgery and I'm watching the first installment of the Ken Burns *National Parks* documentary. It's full of interesting little tidbits. For instance, did you know that at some time, long ago, there were no roads in America? Hard to believe isn't it. And, if you think about this, there's a lot more implied—like,

no cheeseburgers, no wiener-shaped cars, no silly string or laffy taffy. No polyethylene or aerosol shaving cream. No truck stops. No adult cinema or houses of ill repute. No houses at all. Mr. Burns, I won't pretend to tell you your business, but I must say that all of this is hard to swallow. Without truck stops where would a trucker stop, and

how would that trucker go about getting a handjob at three-thirty in the AM if he had no green faux-leather booth to sit in, no linoleum to stretch his swollen red eyes across, no place to see me—or someone, it really could be anyone at a truck stop—walk in wearing nothing but red galoshes and a Mickey Mouse rain slicker?

I suppose it might be true that America was once a wilderness, without any of the things I know in America, but I think you can understand—and when I say you here, I am no longer speaking to Mr. Ken Burns, who has begun to annoy me, but rather to you, my lovely, my precious, my darling neighbor—I think you can understand why it's a hard thing to take, all of this about America without roads.

Really, my dear neighbor, I think you understand most things better than I. For instance, I stopped by your apartment the other day while you were out, and noticed that among the many items hanging from your clothesline was a pair of panties with a heart-shaped hole cut out of the crotch. Now I wonder, what can this mean? Tell me, my dear, what does one *do* with an item like that?

Of course, it would have been easier to surmise the hole's use if I could still see. I suppose that when I started telling you a moment ago about the National Parks documentary, I should have said I was *listening* to it, not watching it, since my eyesight was really almost all gone. This

was why, when the LASIK commercial appeared on T.V. three nights before, I bellowed a command at the device to heal me. And now I am all set to be healed. Because, in the America that I live in, full of roads and tools and interactive devices, we have the ability to fix things that break. Like eyeballs.

As I listen to the documentary I hear Ken Burns begin to describe the relationship between ravens and wolves. I know, I know what you're thinking—that's rather *odd*. Ravens and wolves? Now that is a strange miscegenation. But it's not that kind of relationship. This is a natural union, a thing of balance and harmony. Ken told me, and this really is a neat thing, that in some of these big open areas with trees and I suppose lots of grass and other animals, you know, these *parks*—abominations, these wild wastes, if you ask me, but Mr. Burns seems to have some foolish attachment to them, and he did a damn good Civil War thing, so I at least want to hear him out—anyway, in these parks, there are ravens who hang around the wolves and actually team up with them.

Now, you might think the ravens are just waiting to eat the leftovers from what the wolves kill. But you are wrong. It's the wolves who are waiting on the ravens. What the ravens do, Ken told me, is go out and find something to kill—a plump little antelope, let's say, all naked and alone out there, not even a little rain slicker to hide its different little parts.

The ravens find this helpless creature, and they go back and tell the wolves about it, with their eyes or something, or through some kind of language they've invented, of cawing and howls—I don't exactly know because I can't see what they're doing—and then the ravens lead the wolves to the antelope and the wolves kill it, and they share the meat.

Well, this raven thing really impressed me. I decided that the next morning, before my surgery, I would get myself a raven. That way it could take care of me while I was recovering. And, I must admit, I flatter myself sometimes by thinking that I'm wolf-like—you know, strong and virile, with big healthy teeth.

As a side note, I must tell you that this eyesight thing has been a huge blow to my self-image. Usually such a strong, healthy specimen, with vigorous teeth, I find myself lately feeling decrepit and small inside. You see, the loss of my eyesight has come on so quickly that I've hardly known myself. Only a few days ago I woke, ate a breakfast of seaweed and oysters—the seaweed for its antioxidants, the oysters to enhance my vim—and was reading the obituaries when I noticed that things were a little fuzzy on the page. The date wasn't clear, and I couldn't make out the faces in the pictures.

A little later that day, I saw you getting out of bed in your long blue Disney nightshirt and I couldn't read the word on your shirt. Don't think me forgetful, my dear—I know the shirt says

Enchanted; I've read it many times—but what I mean is, I couldn't see the word. I put my birding binoculars down and tried the high-powered ones, but I still couldn't read the word on your shirt. I looked at your face, and this is when I grew frightened, for it, too, was blurry. If I couldn't look at you, if I couldn't watch you do your Tae Bo workouts or drink coffee or feed your cat, I knew I would quickly be unmoored, floating in a world of chaos and meaningless gesticulation.

Oh agony! Never had I valued my eyes until they were lost, never had I seen until I entered the valley of shades and vicious little pygmy mules, as it says in the Bible.

So then there I was, blind, sitting on my couch, thinking about ravens. And you. Always you. Even now I wish I could rush to the little portal in this tiny room and see your face. Oh that I had X-ray binoculars, to see through these grey walls. Oh that my hands were unmanacled and gloved with lacy gloves and caressing your tired feet! I would never tire of caressing them, trembly as they are, never cease to wear those wicked heart-holed panties and prance for you, if only you would have me as your neighbor for all time.

The next day, surgery day, I got up early and set out to find a raven. I bumped along the street, the world quite dark, halloing those I passed until I arrived at a gathering where music

was played and people were talking and laughing.

"Hello?" I said to the nearest person, and grabbed onto whatever I could grab.

"Unhand me," said a voice.

"I'm sorry, friend, but I cannot see. Look, I am simply trying to find a raven to buy. Do you know where I might find such a thing?"

"A raven? But this is a farmer's market. I'm afraid you're in the wrong place."

"Am I?" I said coyly, for I know these types, who simply want to haggle. "But don't farmers keep ravens about, to show them where the antelopes are?" I could tell by the man's silence that I had intimidated him with the depth of my knowledge. "And further," I said, "why would farmers have scareravens if they didn't also have ravens somewhere about? It would be a little strange, wouldn't it, to scare a thing that wasn't there?"

Now I'd really won. I waited for him to take my elbow and show me to the secret raven booth, but in fact he had disappeared.

I stumbled onward, grabbing out at people in the hopes of making contact with someone. I suppose I was mumbling about ravens, too, for soon there were men on either side of me, asking questions.

"What you want with a raven?" one said.

"Why, what any man wants," I replied. "Companionship, guidance, and a

straight path to the nearest sure thing." I laughed, showing them my long, healthy teeth. "You know," I said, "fresh meat." I raised my eyebrows suggestively.

"Sure, sure, we got you, old man," the second man said. Instinctively, I reached for his throat. Old indeed! Fortunately for him his friend put a hand on my shoulder, and calmed me.

"Hold on," he said. "Hold on now. I'll get you a raven."

A moment later a small furry thing was placed in my hands. I ran my fingers over its body. "This is a cat," I said. I know the texture well. I've petted yours, you see, when you're away from your apartment. Sometimes I close my eyes and pretend it's your soft skin I'm running my hands across.

"No," the second one said (I knew him now by his whiny, cowardly voice), "no, that raven's just a little sick. But it'll get better. Just give it time." The first one started laughing, and then they were both laughing.

I threw the creature on the ground, hard, hoping to smash it into pieces. "There's no wings on that thing!" I shouted. "Ravens have wings!"

"Shit, old man!" the first one said. "You nearly killed that cat."

"You some kinda crazy," the other one said.

I waved my hand in front of my face, hoping to slap one of them. "I am not old. I am simply seeking the services of a raven. But it's clear that you *gentlemen*"—I wasn't going to lose my

own dignity, even if they'd lost theirs, you see—"you have nothing to offer me. So I will say good day to you."

I turned to walk off, and fell down over something, perhaps a small dog or a child. I knew it only by the low keening noise it made after my falling body struck it. As I was picking myself up the second man leaned down and whispered into my ear in his whiny voice.

"Hold on, hold on now, we got ravens right here. You just hang tight."

In a moment another creature was placed in my hands. "That's fifty bucks," the man said. I held out my wallet, and he extracted the money.

At first the creature tried to jump out of my hands, but I held it there tightly. I felt over it with my fingers, and found that it had two hard little wings the texture of cardboard. Its surface was surprisingly similar to fur, but I'd really never touched feathers so I had no idea what they were supposed to feel like. Where the wings met the body it was sticky, like glue, but I thought nothing of it at the time.

Oh treachery of man! If you had been there, perhaps, you who seem to frequent Disneyworld and Disneyland and all parks themed and American (and not those other parks, those roadless abominations of open space),

you who know so much about elliptical machines and Jazzercise videos and drinking coffee, and cats and what to feed them, you could have steered me away from those men. But alas I was alone, and purchased the so-called raven outright.

PERHAPS THIS WAS A CAT RAVEN, I THOUGHT TO MYSELF, SOME KIND OF SPECIAL CREATURE OF THE FUTURE.

A block away I threw the raven thing vigorously into the air, and heard it fall quite hard, howling, back to the ground. I reached for it and my hand came back scratched and bloody.

"How now," I said. "Ravens don't have claws." My mind, nimble as it is, began working. Perhaps this was a cat raven, I thought to myself, some kind of special creature of the future. Who knows what these cloning folks have come up with, with their mighty tools. Perhaps this was one more innovation, like the LASIK surgery I would soon receive, that had been

made to ease my life. Because who's to say scientists don't also watch Ken Burns' movies? Why, I'm sure if you had told someone ten years ago that you could get such a thing as a LASIK surgery simply by bellowing at your T.V., they would have called you mad. But now look where we are!

I swatted the cat raven for scratching me, and tucked it into my trench coat, holding it there firmly though it yowled

and thrashed and sliced at my abdomen all the way home.

Once arrived I sat on my couch as the afternoon darkened, waiting for the LASIK surgery to happen. My new companion was very animated inside my trench coat, and after some time I finally, regretfully released it. It had been so warm and cozy in there, even though it had been clawing continually at my stomach, that it was hard to let it go. For after all, what is love without pain? Nothing but a field of poppies whose heads have been cut off, every single one.

It occurred to me that I should send my cat raven on its first hunt, but I didn't have the heart to release it from my apartment. And how would I follow it to the kill without my sight? Oh what a fool I'd been!

I sensed a presence in the room—a soft tread of shoes on the carpet, a movement of the air beside my cheek—and I lunged out with my mouth, hoping to bite the intruder. “I will not give you the things you want!” I shouted. “I will not dance for you in my rain slicker, and I have burned the red galoshes!”

But there was no one there.

I called the cat raven back to me and stroked its wings until one of them came away in my hand. And now it was all clear, the great deception of man, the great loneliness of this life in which I no longer have even the sight of your kind face.

As Job had mourned so many decades before, I, too, mourned now

and called out his same lament, as it reads, “Oh is me! oh to have sunk to such profoundly low vistas! oh that my god has forsaken such a wretch as here but for god I once was not and now find myself to be!” And Satan himself, whose answer at the start of Job is so wily when God asks him from whence he came, and he says, as you'll recall: “From walking this way and that in the open fields and National Parks of the world.” Satan himself could not have spoken more salacious and mendacious words than those I now heard issue from outside my window. For there was a man at your door, a man knocking and then asking—I swear I could hear the sibilant hiss of his Satanic tongue—asking if you were free for an evening stroll.

A stroll indeed! As if you strolled. As if you walked at all! You, my dear, are a runner, there is no doubt about it. As am I, my darling. As am I.

Soon I will follow my cat raven to you. These great teeth of mine were not made to chew on vegetables, now were they? I will set out on one last hunt, LASIK be damned, blindness be damned. I must find you. For if I am alone in this world much longer, then I am not long for this world.

Come to me, my cat raven. I will take you in my arms and release you from this balcony, release you through this cursed portal.

Come to me, my dear, and fly. 🦇