

In the Wake of the Crows

V

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Leading up and down the hill were three or four other sets of footprints breaking through the snow. He stood at the top, looking down at the path he was about to take. One of the tracks was his own from walking home on the previous night.

As he approached the cluster of trees at the bottom of the hill, the clear surface of the snow was broken by thousands of fork-shaped lacerations, like the Greek letter ψ , pressed into the snow over and over.

In the previous weeks, hundreds of thousands of crows in search of a slightly warmer climate than the bitter, frozen North, have been making short migrations. He realized they must have just passed by for a few hours in the later portion of the night, as the trees were bare when he walked under them just ten hours ago.

When he looked down at his feet, he saw that his own tracks were crushing the prints left by the crows. A strange feeling of dread passed through him, and he felt as if he was intruding on territory that wasn't his own. It was almost as if he could still hear the cacophony of crows, even though the morning was as silent as early morning gets.

He stepped over small piles of frozen black feathers. The crow prints looked more frantic around them, as if evidence of a scuffle.

The snow had turned a pale green here, and for a moment he thought that live, fresh grass was poking up somehow through the mid-winter frost, but then he realized that it was just waste left behind by the crows, fecal matter frozen in ice.

Under the trees, no fewer than six squirrels, sluggish with winter fat and groggy with the cold, scabbled about in the wake of the crows. They picked at the snow, leaving furrows from dragging their heavy stomachs, turning over tiny rocks and moving dry twigs.

They looked up at him with hopeless, bleary eyes, as if he could help them find their caches of food that the crows must have broken into.

He quickly walked past the trees and made his way back to the main road that led down to town where he worked. Later that night, he took a different path home.