

The Book of Kells

But then four crows—no, maybe ravens—those large, black birds big as dogs,
like gentlemen, crossed the path, looking up, contemplating something invisible,

feathers on their crowns at attention, as if waxed into style, sun polishing each upright stalk,
asphalt, grass visible between each black spear, the way, when younger, we spiked

our hair before dancing all night at an after-hours club, but I don't know
what it means now: Rocking gait: slow procession: pondering a shared question—

unseen force drawing them across the road or a predator overhead
or walking away from despair hidden in the heart. She looks

to be holding a miniature man in her lap, the Mary of Kells. He has
two left feet. And she stares, her face a mask of sorrow, eyes flattened, looking ahead.

The messengers hover. They want to bear her away. They want to sing hosannas.
But they are cramped inside the box of the possible, heads bent sideways, thinking

of what it means to think. They want to take responsibility. They want
to turn the tide. But they barely fit around her.

*When the angel came, Mary was sitting in time untimely. She was sitting, a creature
uncreaturely. She was sitting in the body maidenly. Her soul was deiform.*

How to speak in the face of it? our world of desire run amok. The crows
looked up as they walked, a slight rocking turn of head, side to side. And something

drew them, an invisible thread pulled them forward, across a road freighted
with peril & they alert or oblivious, bent on what they were seeking.

*Her mind was heavenly calm. Her outward life was altogether lovely.
Her soul was generous. Her heart was aflame with the truth.*

His gaze is only for her—infant, small man—cheekbone outlined in a red swipe.
And snakes, green and blue, interlace the border, boxing her in, holding her in place.

She is acute, staring ahead, the baby's hand on hers, asking attention. Yellow orpiment—
culled from volcanoes, brought from the Mediterranean—copper, red leaf, malachite,

blue from indigo, woad. Not, perhaps, the ground richness of lapis lazuli. Blue powder crushed to a small mound on the board. *Arsenic sulphide*. And lead, that worms

its way into the brain, aches in elbows, knees, the mind sliding off its target, thought becalmed in haze. Is the way not always heavy with risk?

The artists layered three pigments, each wash on another, to make the yellow orpiment bleed up through indigo, make lion and peacock lift in wholeness

and stand on parchment. But I can only imagine this now. Time and good intention have flattened the creatures, made them to lie back down on leaves,

as so often happens: benign attention gone awry, consequences a poison unforeseen. Still, they are a gathering, a quire, a gabble of creatures who twist and coil,

set into ring or lace, stretched or condensed for ornament. But they live: who turn to abide with one eye on me: caught, [I am] fixed in place, circled and held.

And the scribes? They cut each quill—tail feather of goose or swan—to impossible fineness, each capital a jewel: embellishment of face or beast

as door to the divine—fools!—the script a sea of birds in flight across vellum, who turn in unison on the leaves, “head-under-wing,”

their cries sharp across a surface stretched tight, their wings the soot black of burned bones, their swoop and whorl the uplift in a sky as open as

She was in the land of freedom. She sat in the cell of recollection and dispassion.