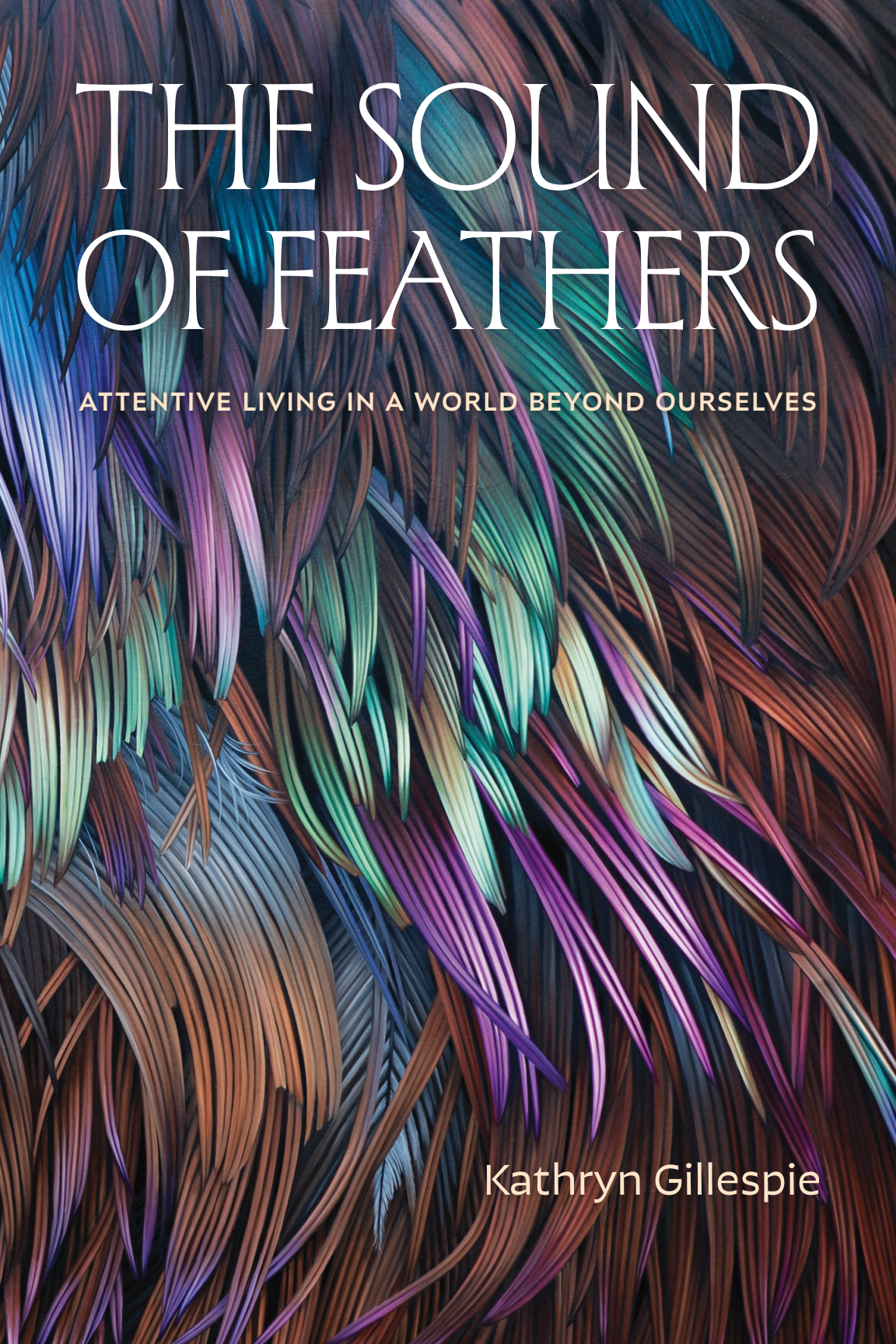




THE SOUND OF FEATHERS

ATTENTIVE LIVING IN A WORLD BEYOND OURSELVES

Kathryn Gillespie

The Sound of Feathers



BUY

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THE SOUND OF FEATHERS

ATTENTIVE LIVING IN A WORLD BEYOND OURSELVES

DUKE

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For Peter

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Preface

Bringing this book to publication has been a painstakingly slow process, beginning in 2016 and continuing through the years of the COVID-19 pandemic. The book itself has changed during these years, not only because of catastrophic world events like the pandemic and the deepening climate crisis but also because I, myself, have changed. For me, these years have been characterized by an intensity of transformation and growth I hadn't experienced before in my life. I ended a twenty-year relationship and moved from my urban life in Seattle to a town of around a hundred year-round residents in a remote part of Washington State to follow my lifelong dream of living on the land.

During this time, I've built a home here from the ground up on fifteen acres that had a well but no other infrastructure, struggling through learning everything—How to frame in walls in a shipping-container-turned-art-and-workspace. How to make flooring that looks like hardwood out of plywood. How to build a staircase up a steep hill. How to build a fence to keep deer out of the garden. How to melt four inches of ice on the roof to install a chimney for a woodstove. How to build a chicken coop in zero-degree weather. I've learned which plants are noxious weeds that I'm legally required to remove, and I've started to learn which plants are native to the area and have medicinal qualities. I've learned to make salves and

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tinctures and put up food for winter. I've learned to buck hay. I've learned to "bed" a water line in a six-foot-deep trench, and I've learned how to dig my car out of snow drifts when I've driven off the road in icy conditions. I've learned to sit perfectly quiet and still to befriend the chipmunks here (I've just paused typing this because one is sitting on my thigh at my desk).

I'm somewhat accident-prone, and this place is rough for someone with that tendency. I've fallen off roofs and ladders. I've smashed fingers with rocks and hammers. I've nearly knocked myself out getting plywood out of the back of a truck. I've shocked myself on faulty wiring. I've been cut and gouged removing rusty barbed wire. I have scars from cuts and scrapes too numerous to remember how I got them. I've been sent flying on my face when I was rammed from behind by the neighbor's wandering horned sheep. I've dug too many holes in hardpack dirt and rocks to count, my back killing me, screaming my frustrations in a string of profanities across the valley.

I've struggled to maintain my sanity through winters of minus twenty-eight degrees Fahrenheit and feet of snow for six months of the year. My pipes have frozen and burst more than once. I've had hot water off and on (more off in that first year). I've gone for months at a time without a working shower and had the best date of my life because of its absolute perfection under the circumstances—coin showers at the gas station and burritos from the taco truck in the town forty minutes away.

It's not an easy place to live. In fact, it's probably difficult more times than not. But there's something electric and magical in making a new life—really making it, with my hands and muscles and sweat and grit and, yes, a lot of tears and rage. There's something beautiful, too, about life being dictated by the seasons—by planting and harvesting, preparing for winter, waiting eagerly for spring. There's conversation (and sometimes disagreements) about when it's safe to put your tomatoes outside in the garden or whether the first frost will come late enough for them to ripen. Everyone works on getting their firewood for winter and splitting and stacking it in late summer. There's hay-hauling season to ensure food for the animals in the winter. There's garlic harvesting in July and then planting in October. There's noxious weed pulling when the musk thistle and hoary alysum are coming into bloom. There's a communal aspect to all of this, even when you don't talk to people about it and even when there's divisiveness within the community (and there is that, in spades)—everyone doing the same tasks on which life relies at the same time. There's also beauty in the

simplicity of life lived in this way that lends itself to a slower, more attentive way of seeing and being in the world.

Here, I've also learned to love in a new way, a perhaps truer way, a way that's different from the kind of love we fall into at eighteen or twenty or thirty, the kind that navigates the wounds and experiences accumulated over decades that have shaped how we arrive at who we are today. James, my partner in this new experience of love, lives across the road, working on his own project of building a life here in the place where he grew up after a long time away. We coordinate our planting, share our harvest, and shoulder together the difficulties of living here. We help each other with two-person jobs and learn from each other, creating an intimate sense of community tied to the cadence of the mundane and extraordinary moments of everyday life.

In a lot of ways, I'm a different person now than the person I was when I first drafted this book eight years ago. But what hasn't changed—in fact, what has only intensified—is my interest in and dedication to practicing attentiveness to the world around me. Here, there is more wild nature than human infrastructure, and it means learning to respect, be in awe of, and sit in a near-constant state of unknowing about the world around me. It's a place of wonder in its newness, its strangeness, the hope of learning more, and the many things it's impossible to know. It makes me feel alive to try to cultivate an openness to being shown just how much I don't know, and to revel in the tiny secrets this place and the inhabitants here (human and nonhuman) have to share.

It was my dad who brought me here. He moved here during the pandemic to live with my uncle, tucked away safely in such an unpopulated area. Two years later, I followed him. He had helped me fall in love with this place when I'd come to visit and we drove around marveling at the landscape, working together to harvest garlic, raspberries, and strawberries, doting on Jinsky the tabby cat, and sitting in the backyard at night, looking up at the stars. So many stars in this dark, dark sky.

A year after I moved, he died unexpectedly, knocking my world off its axis. He didn't get to read this book—something he was waiting eagerly to do. But in my unfortunate perfectionism, I wanted it to be better than it was before he read it. Then, he fell and hit his head, causing an irreparable brain bleed, didn't regain consciousness, and died three days later. For those three days, my sister and I sat at his bedside talking to him, telling him jokes and stories and sharing what he meant to us, playing his favorite

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music, relaying the latest town gossip, and reading. He taught me how to write—with love and dedication, and with a brutally cutting criticism that would crush and inspire me in equal measure. Ours was a shared lifetime of exploring what writing is and can be. It was a shared project of choosing words carefully, of thinking about their meaning, what they're saying, and how to articulate thoughts that can feel impossible to put into words. The way his mind worked was wholly unique and rare, and he would often say, in an offhanded way, something so staggeringly insightful, so strange, so extraordinary it took my breath away. As he was dying, I read to him from this book, hoping that he could hear the words and know that this was the gift he had given me.

This past year without him has been one of unmooring, of living on unstable ground, stabilized in moments by the connection to the ground beneath my feet, the dirt under my fingernails, the lush green of the hills in spring and their burnt gold in late summer, and in the rhythm of life unfolding for the deer, elk, chipmunks, ground marmots, cows, sheep, coyotes, bobcats, and so many others. The sound of the wind in the aspen and the songs of birds in the garden. The static electricity and smell of rain in the air as a thunderstorm rolls in. The absolute silence of fresh snow. There's incredible stability in being on the earth and remembering that we're also of the earth.

I share all of this to give context for the life I'm living, the stories I tell in this book, where I've been, where I am now, and the unknown of the futures to come. Our lives are lived in stories, in encounters that shape who we are, how we see the world—what is, what was, and what could be. The invitation I open to you in this book is to look at your own life—who you are, where you are, and who you want to be—in new ways. I invite you to wonder. To look with a new attentiveness at what and who is around you, and to think about what could be.

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Introduction

LISTENING FOR THE SOUND OF FEATHERS

When the wind catches in a particular direction and blows the marine air into Seattle, the morning smells to me like life itself. On early morning walks with the three beagles with whom I share a home, late in the chilly, wet Seattle winter, the world is vibrating with life. Bright green mosses cover walls and paths, and ferns unfurl new fronds. A misty rain moistens every surface, slowly creating drips from the few remaining giant cedars. Droplets form on every blade of grass, the damp soil and decomposing leaves mixing with the briny Puget Sound air—an intense fusion of earth and sea.

Snails creep across the sidewalk in the hours before dawn, hopefully tucking themselves in somewhere safe before the commuter foot traffic threatens to crush them. A flicker uses their beak to scratch for a breakfast of insects in a sidewalk crack. A pair of Steller's jays swoop, two brilliant blue flashes, screeching their unmistakable screech, past a lone crow sitting on the top of a telephone pole, peering down at life unfolding on the ground. A rabbit pauses in the tall grasses of an unmown lawn—alert, ears twitching ever so slightly. It's garbage pickup day, and a pair of raccoons lumber away from an overturned trash can, garbage strewn across the street, and disappear into one of the few remaining overgrown lots, dense with ivy, underbrush, and trees. Are they just now heading to bed? A trio of ducks kept in someone's side yard with a scuzzy artificial pond wake up as I pass

by, shaking their tail feathers at me and quacking their morning greeting. Somewhere down the block, I hear the familiar clucking of chickens as they awaken to begin their day in someone's backyard. The beagles I'm walking with are alert, listening, alive as their noses skim the ground, following a scent, their tails up and their paws wet from the damp grass of the lawns on which they trespass in these early morning hours.

There aren't many other humans out at this hour: a few early morning dog walkers who might stop for a quick canine hello, or who might hurry past, choking up on their dog's leash, pretending not to see Lucy the beagle prancing in eager anticipation of a canine encounter. A lone runner jogging methodically in the direction of the park. The twentysomething heading home wearing last night's clothes, not in a hurry. An elder out early, pruning a bush in their garden. But mostly, the world of the human city is still asleep.

I walk quietly down the sidewalk, listening carefully for the sound of feathers. Some days, one of the crows I know swoops down low, from behind, and flies past my ear—the whisper of feathers tracing a light wind across my cheek. They land on the power line above where I'm walking with the beagles. Together, we wait while Lucy, Saoirse, and Amelia sniff a spot of shared interest in the grass. We continue on our walk and make it halfway down another block when I again hear the rustle of wings in flight close overhead. Again, they alight on the power line. We walk like this, through the neighborhood. Swoop, rustle, whisper, wait.

Sometimes, we're out on our walks and this particular crow comes to get us. I'll be daydreaming, my gaze half focused on a plant I don't recognize in someone's garden many blocks from our house, when I feel the presence of someone above me. I look up and there they are, peering down at us, sometimes offering a little chirp in what I've come to understand as a *hello*, or maybe a more casual *hey*. They follow us home and wait while I go inside, unleash the beagles, and grab a handful of almonds or peanuts. I bring them out and toss them into a little green dish I keep on the front walk beneath our fig tree for sharing food, on occasion, with the crows.

This relationship started when, one summer, I noticed a pair of crows raising their fledgling on our block. As I would later learn, there is much about observing crows that requires a level of attentiveness that I'm not sure is possible in most humans. But noticing a baby crow learning to navigate the world does not require any level of refined attentiveness. They are incredibly loud. Their demanding, croaky cries are unmistakable. They wait on the ground, or perched on a wall, crying, until their parents appear with

some food, at which point the cries intensify as they tilt their heads back, extend and flap their wings slightly, and wait for the food to be delivered into their bright pink mouths. Then they are suddenly silent, gobbling down whatever treat has been gathered for them. In that moment of eating, they look like a giant version of any other baby bird. But at any other time, to the undiscerning eye, they look like an adult crow.

By the time we see fledgling crows, they are nearly full grown in size, but they usually spend most of their time on the ground, which can seem like unusual crow behavior to the human onlooker. This is perhaps one reason why so many people mistakenly believe fledgling crows are injured and try to “rescue” them by capturing them and taking them home or to a wildlife rehabber. Late spring is what a friend of mine refers to as *crow-napping season*. In most cases they are not, in fact, in need of “rescue” or any help at all—they are simply learning to live in the world, and if you’re attentive to the context, you’re likely to notice that their parents are close by, watching them from a distance, feeding them, protecting them, and teaching them to find food and eat on their own.

It was this particular fledgling crow, whose parents watched them so carefully, who would grow up to come along on our dog walks. We spent that first year getting to know each other. I sat for hours watching them, wondering at their lives and lifeways. I read as many crow books as I could find. I tried to understand them. And I felt persistently—exhaustingly—inept. It took me months to even be able to wager a guess at who was who in this little group of three. I studied their faces the best I could. I looked at their feet and their wings, the shape of their beaks, their feathers, the way they behaved in their familial structure of three. There were things I noticed about their behavior, or I’d notice that one had gotten something white (bird shit, probably?) on the end of one wing, or that another one was molting faster than the others. But in the end, the only way I could reliably identify them was by the most rudimentary observational quality: their size. There was one parent who was the biggest, the other parent who was slightly smaller, and the fledgling who, although they grew similar in size to the smaller parent, was in that first year slenderer. But even these differences were only discernible relationally—when all three were there together and I could easily compare their sizes. If they showed up alone, most often I would be back at square one.

By contrast, crows have incredible facial recognition, remembering the face of a human person for years after an encounter with them. In a study at

the University of Washington, conducted on the capacity for facial recognition in crows, researchers donned what they termed “dangerous” masks and then captured crows on campus.¹ These crows were then held captive in labs for a period of time, studied, and then released. Long after their release, crows in the campus community would harass researchers when they put on the masks. They remembered that these particular faces had been the ones to capture them, and they retained that negative association.

When I read about this, I wondered what it would be like to be trapped, held captive, studied, and released—the uncontainable panic and fear the birds would experience, both the ones being captured and those watching from the safety of a tree or wire. The capture of birds and other wild animals, including the practice of fitting them with bands and tracking devices, is highly routine in both academic research and conservation work. These practices are framed as being for a greater good—of counting or following the individuals of a species, of studying the bodies and lives of birds, of obtaining greater knowledge about other species.

In my experience trying to understand the crows, and in my research with other species, I’ve found that the pursuit of knowledge (my own and others’) is powerful and often can result in an incursion into animals’ lives and homes. It’s difficult to read a book about crows or any other species and realize that some, if not most, of that knowledge was obtained through some form of disruption or harm (temporary or permanent) to individuals. It’s difficult especially because of the joy and wonder that learning about other animals can evoke. Reading about crows, I was at once filled with gratitude for this knowledge and a pang of pain in thinking about how it was gotten.

As that first summer passed, my relationship with these three crows evolved. Some mornings they would show up, demanding to be fed. My bedroom window was just above the front walk, and they discovered that if they came around at six o’clock in the morning and rattled the plate on the cement walk, it made such a loud racket that I would eventually get up to feed them. While one waited in the fig tree, another rattled the plate, and the third would sit on the power line that stretches from the street to the front of our house. At this level, they could peer directly into the bedroom window. As soon as I sat up in bed, the crow surveilling the bedroom would perk up, stare straight at me, and caw loudly, insistently. The crow on the ground would bang the plate again. I would get up to feed them. I’d been well trained.

Being in relationship with these crows has made me attuned to other crows. It's odd to think of my intentionally cultivated relations with these crows suddenly making me aware of crows everywhere I went. Hadn't I, in fact, been in relationship with these and other crows for years? Hadn't I, in fact, been living in relation with all the other human and nonhuman lives around me since I was born? But I didn't register crow calls or notice the magical sound of wind through their feathers as crows fly past until I rendered myself attentive to their lives, their bodies, and their presence.

That first summer, as I brought my attention to the crows, during molting season, I noticed that the neighborhood was covered in crow feathers. As it turns out, it's like this every year, but in previous years I hadn't noticed. One afternoon, I was walking home, and as I came up to our house, I found a long, shiny-black crow feather on the sidewalk. I picked it up and twirled it around between my thumb and forefinger, admiring it. One of the crows chirped from the electrical wire above. I looked up. They peered down, watching. I gave them a nod and took the feather into the house and put it on a shelf filled with treasures like fallen feathers, rocks, seashells, and pine cones.

The next day, when I delivered the crows a treat of sunflower seeds, I moved back a few steps from the dish and watched. The largest of the three crows swooped down and landed with one claw on a low branch of the fig tree in the front yard. In the other claw, they clutched a perfect crow feather. The crow looked at me. Looked down at the plate. Looked back at me. And then slowly extended the claw holding the feather and released their grasp, dropping the feather right next to the plate. The crow looked at me again and cawed. I stepped forward carefully, and they hopped up higher in the fig tree as I moved to retrieve the feather. I picked it up and looked closely at it, appreciating its beauty. I whispered *thank you*.

I walked back to the house, wondering with awe at the gift I'd been given, and I heard the familiar rustle of feathers as the crow dropped down to the ground to discover what snacks I had left for them. *Remarkable*, I thought. Noticing I appreciated the beauty of the feather I found the day before, here I was delivered another even more stunning feather by one of the crows themselves. Was this one of their own feathers, I wondered? Was it a feather from a stranger that they had found on the ground and brought here? These kinds of things are probably not knowable, but I like to spend time wondering.

The following spring, the crows disappeared to build their nest, lay their eggs, and tend to their young. Often, a pair of crows will be joined by a third crow in caring for the nest and parenting, and usually a young crow will stay with their parents for a year or two before finding a mate themselves. I wondered if the young crow born the year before had joined their parents in co-parenting whoever was incubating and hatching in their nest.

After what felt to me like a long wait, joyously, they emerged from the nest with three healthy fledgling crows. The family of three had become a family of six. Our garden suddenly felt like a proper gathering place for crows—all six would descend into the fig tree or land on the fence, hopping deftly down to the ground. The three young ones were awkward and timid, watching the adults carefully and taking cues from them about when it would be safe to enter the yard and when to spring into flight and move to safety.

The sound of feathers came in a wave that year the crows descended, a flurry of black wings. There were times when I worried about how conspicuous they were visiting our yard. When there were three, they had been noticeable if you were a neighbor paying attention, but when their flock grew to six, they were impossible to miss. On the neighborhood social media app Nextdoor there had been a series of posts around this same time about the fact that crows, and other birds as well, were digging up people's lawns to get at the tasty grubs beneath the grass. I had seen them doing it all over the neighborhood. The lawns were shredded, little tufts of dirt and grass yanked up and tossed aside.

Overwhelmingly, the consensus was that crows were destructive, loud, dirty, and aggressive, and many people claimed they had no business being in the neighborhood. "They're just up to no good," one commenter posted. Others suggested all kinds of possible solutions to driving the crows from the neighborhood and addressing the grub-digging problem in particular. The most common seemed to be to "get to the root of the problem" and poison the grubs, followed by some suggestions to poison the crows themselves.

Nextdoor is meant to be a social media platform dedicated to bringing neighbors together around shared conversations and issues, but what I've observed over the years reading posts and comments is that it is often a space for grievances in various forms to be expressed and validated. Disgruntled complaints are targeted at all kinds of things: at airplane noise under the flight path, at people who use leaf blowers, at car drivers by bicyclists and at bicyclists by car drivers, at dog walkers who don't pick up

their dog's poop and at dog walkers who do pick up their dog's poop but toss it in other people's garbage bins. I've noticed, especially as it relates to topics like the poisoning of crows or the eradication of coyotes or raccoons (or any other number of undesirable urban species), that the online space allows for an echo chamber of validation for increasing intolerance of other species. And this intolerance is not limited to the digital sphere but travels out into the world to harm the animals themselves—the crows, the grubs, the rats, and many others.

Both online and offline, many people seem to view crows as a nuisance for their propensity to get into garbage bins and make a mess, or because they're loud, or for whatever other myriad reasons might attract disdain. But in this case, the fact that they were now destroying people's lawns—the carefully manicured pinnacle of the middle-class landscaping aesthetic—moved them into a category marked for eradication. I worried over this little family of six—that they were attracting attention here in the yard. I worried that the crows would be poisoned while they were out foraging for the day, and I was relieved every time I saw them show up, together, as an intact family.

Crows flourish in areas with high densities of humans. Unlike other species who may be driven out of cities by human incursion into their homes, crows thrive in human presence. They are scavengers and find plenty of food discarded by humans, and they make their homes in places shared with humans and with other urban animals. But it is precisely this flourishing that marks them as maligned—as a problem to be addressed. As I observed this family of crows over months and years, I wondered: What might it look like to hold in our hearts and minds the histories and lived experiences of those with whom we live closely but who are targets of eradication and expulsion? Or even those we may just ignore in their mundane ever-presence?

It was sometime in the fall of the three new fledglings' first year that I noticed one of them had light-colored crusty spots around their beak and eyes, and that their feet had some growths on the bottom and on the toes. I watched the crow try to land on the ground and immediately hop up as if the impact was painful. I learned from research that it was likely avian pox and that often it could resolve on its own. So, I watched the crow carefully and observed the rest of the family to see if the disease would spread to anyone else, but all the others seemed to be fine. To my untrained eye, it finally looked like the lesions and scabby spots were clearing up, but a week later the crow disappeared. The family of six turned into a family of

five. I assumed the crow had died, and I wondered where they had died and if the family had been there with them. I had read that crows mourn the death of their kin, and I contemplated this family's grief and their rituals around death. I wondered about the mysteries of their experience of loss and mourned for what they might be feeling.

After this disappearance, I watched with a little sadness each evening as they joined with flocks of other crows and flew to their roosts. During their nonbreeding months, crows gather each night to roost in the thousands in a chosen meeting place. These crows and I lived in the south end of Seattle. I had heard from a friend who lives in the north end of town that the crows there fly to a shared roost near her home. The crows in our neighborhood flew south instead of north. I researched online and learned that there is another roost of thousands of crows in an office park next to an IKEA south of Seattle. As dusk fell, the sky was dotted black with crows all flying perfectly in the same direction, cawing to others as if to say: *It's time. Let's go.* I wanted to follow them, to see their roost—to witness the collective gathering, the cacophony of chatter as they came together. The impulse was strong to see what this was like, to try—likely with futility—to understand this family's connection with this much greater whole. But I also wanted to respect their space and this time. They had chosen to spend part of their day with me, here in our shared home, and now they were choosing to end their day in the company of other crows.

There is so much to notice on the everyday walks I take. So many details of life and death unfolding in block after block of urban sidewalk. This noticing requires a level of attentiveness to tiny details—moss in a crack on a stone wall, a beetle overturned and dying, dew on a spider web, the high-pitched chirp of a hummingbird, the smell of decomposing leaves, the sound of feathers. This attentiveness necessitates slowing down—not only in pace but also in thought, clearing space in the mind for wonder. To slow down, notice, and wonder often feels like a reminder of how vibrant the world is, and of how rushing through each moment, hour, and day can cause us to miss many of the most magnificent mundane details of the world. There are moments on these walks when I'm overwhelmed by this beauty and liveliness, by the sheer joy of being present for what is. And still, I'm missing so much. I'm missing so much that I don't even know what or how much I'm missing. It's a constant struggle to pay attention, to try to anticipate what I might not notice.

What does it mean to *pay attention*? In her book *How to Do Nothing*, Jenny Odell writes, “If we think about what it means to ‘concentrate’ or ‘pay attention’ at an individual level, it implies alignment: different parts of the mind and even the body acting in concert and oriented toward the same thing. To pay attention to one thing is to resist paying attention to other things: it means constantly denying and thwarting provocations outside the sphere of one’s attention.”²

To pay attention is a sensory experience—it is not just a matter of looking at something closely. It involves using the senses available to us to fully experience the subject of our focus. With sight, we might take in the lush greens of the moss and cedars and ferns. With hearing, we might listen for the *caw caw caw* of a crow. With a sense of touch, we might kneel to feel the cool, damp blanket of moss and experience the moisture from the ground soaking through the knee of our jeans. With a sense of taste, we might tilt our heads back, open our mouths, and wait for a raindrop to fall. These forms of attention combine in whatever forms of sensory experience shape our lifeworlds, crafting a fuller practice of noticing the cold, misty Pacific Northwest morning.

There’s also what’s behind the thing we’re noticing. Alexandra Horowitz, in her book *On Looking* about the act of paying attention through everyday walks in her neighborhood, explains that “part of seeing what is on an ordinary block is seeing that everything visible has a history. It arrived at the spot where you found it at some time, was crafted or whittled or forged at some time, filled a certain role or existed for a particular function. It was touched by someone (or no one), and touches someone (or no one) now.”³ I’m interested in these histories—the material histories of objects and subjects, and the larger structures in which these acts of noticing, daily life, beauty, and destruction are formed. Attending to something we encounter every day—noticing the thing that is the opposite of noticeable—can reveal rich and complex histories that shape the present and which connect that thing to different times and different places.

Odell’s caution that noticing one thing means ignoring or forgetting or missing other things complicates what it means to pay attention. I bend over to peer at an earthworm struggling to slither across the pavement. I consider whether to pick up the worm and move them to safety in the direction they were heading, or to let them be. While I contemplate the worm, I might not notice a squirrel leaping from one branch to another in the tree above my head. I might not notice a car running a stop sign at

the corner. I might not notice Amelia devouring half a bagel dropped on the parking strip before the other beagles can get it. What other hundred or thousand things am I missing in my focus in that moment on this singular earthworm?

The noticing itself can also obscure a way of understanding this multispecies world that offers a fuller story of the broader picture of life and death today. It may be easy to imagine, for instance, with focused attention trained on the lush green of the Pacific Northwest city vibrating with multispecies life, that the world as we know it is not dying. That the climate crisis is less urgent than it is or that it's not something to worry about right now, at this moment. That this single, classically Pacific Northwest damp, drizzly winter morning is not, now, an anomaly, sandwiched in between months on end of unusual heat, drought, and smoke in summer and torrential rains that bring winter flooding. Noticing, then—paying attention—can be dangerous. It can distract our attention away from the things that may need it most—the things to which we desperately, perhaps for our sanity, do not want to attend.

There's an easiness to appreciating beauty. And there's even an easiness to paying attention to that which does not necessarily elicit feelings of joy or pleasure. An easiness to noticing things that may prompt disgust: the pungent smell of a rat's flattened corpse rotting in the gutter along the street. A hypodermic needle or a used condom tossed carelessly in an alley. A crow pecking at a soiled tampon dragged from someone's trash. But there is no easiness to attending with clarity and persistence to the things that cause us pain, grief, shame, regret, or fear, and there is much to observe in the world that provokes those responses. To pay attention can be an emotional experience—part agony and part euphoria in equal measure.

You look at a blade of grass, soaked with the morning mist, and you might think, "Look! Some grass, wet from the rain!" But what is the fuller story of that blade of grass? We might think about its history, how that grass came to be here, as part of this lawn, normalized as the kind of greenery that is desirable to urban and suburban land occupation. We might think about the chemicals that have been deployed to keep it so perfectly green, so immaculately free of weeds. We might consider whose labor keeps this grass neatly trimmed, a uniform mat stretching out in front of the house. Or we might reflect on whose presence—human, animal, plant—the planting of this lawn necessitated the displacement of. This process of attentiveness and the seeking out of knowledge to understand it might involve moments of discovery and surprise, and it might be deeply unsettling, destabilizing

the things we think we know, the things we want to believe about the way we live our lives and the way we see the world. This unsettling—the feeling of being unsettled, the unsettling of norms—is at the heart of this book.

When I was little, a sense of wonder came easily and powerfully. As children, our lives are full of experiencing things for the first time, of learning what and who things are, how they're in relation with other things and beings, where things come from, and how it all fits together to construct social and environmental life. I remember as a kid lying flat on my stomach on the warm summer sidewalk watching a line of ants carrying crumbs off to their home, amazed by their strength, their focus, and the way they worked in concert with one another. I remember watching the seemingly endless loop of feeding in a nest of robins—the parents leaving and bringing food back to the nest, the baby birds crying desperately, and then the sound of frantic gobbling when it was delivered to their open mouths. I remember watching seagulls at the beach in North Carolina swooping in to grab a bag of chips when a beachgoer's attention was turned somewhere else and a murder of crows ransacking dumpsters that radiated the nauseating smell of rotten fish. I remember standing on the back porch in the steamy heat of Pittsburgh summers watching the fireflies light up the backyard in irregular bursts of glowing light, and the sound of cicadas singing their chorus, leaving behind their exoskeletons on trees to be carefully plucked from the bark and inspected in the light of day. This curiosity was rooted in a struggle to understand—to observe, to ask questions, to practice greater attentiveness, to fail to understand, and to observe more closely.

I remember observing living beings and letting them be, and I remember touching them, capturing them, inadvertently harming them, thinking I could care for them in an artificial environment—the lightning bugs caught and confined to a jar. The butterflies I held in my cupped hands who died as I watched, having been handled too roughly. There were what we called potato bugs (also known as pill bugs or roly-polies) I plucked carefully from the sidewalk and collected in my hand so that when I opened it, they all unrolled from their scared little balls and swarmed over my palm. There were dandelion flowers torn from the grass to make flower crowns. There were crawfish or salamanders fished from a stream and played with until I got bored. And there were the tadpoles sloshing around in a jar as I checked every few minutes to see if they'd turned into frogs. Without direction

otherwise, the urge to touch, to hold, or to investigate animals in captivity is an automatic impulse, without knowledge of what harm it can do.

There were also times when the harm was not inadvertent or unintentional, framed as fun, even as it was clear that the animals were suffering, as in the case of the live blue crabs my dad would buy from the fish store on vacation. We would hold crab races on the kitchen floor, watching as the crabs crawled from one side of the room to the other before we boiled them alive in a large pot, holding the lid down tightly to stop their efforts to crawl out. I remember, too, perching on the edge of a dock with our fishing poles, stabbing the fishing hook through wriggling worms again and again to make sure they were secure bait. I recall the excitement as we hauled a fish out of the water as they thrashed in the air, and the frenzy as we struggled to tear the hook out of their mouths before tossing them into a cooler. The ambivalence I felt in these moments was a mix of flurried excitement and distress at these animals' obvious suffering.

I was a sensitive kid, heartbroken over the tragedies of nature or the overlooked pain of those in this multispecies world around me. I was also—as most kids seem to be—insatiably curious. I was in a constant state of wonder, of wide-eyed joy and surprise at learning something new—a bottomless well of questioning and craving satisfying answers. I (and I think a lot of others) experienced childhood as having endless questions that bubble up and need answering to understand the world. Things are magical, observed for the first time. As we age, we think with increasing confidence that we understand the world around us, that we've learned a lot about what things are and how they work, or maybe it's just the exhaustion and responsibility of adult life that co-opts the time we might otherwise spend in this wondrous state. Whatever it is, in the process, we lose some of the joy of those first discoveries of observing closely, seeing the enchantment of the places we live. Our lives become routine. The sense of wonder slips away, little by little. And we can be alienated from the nuanced details of the world around us.

How, as we get further from childhood, do we reclaim that buried sense of wonder? How do we cultivate a renewed attentiveness, looking at the world with fresh minds and hearts to be electrified by the magic of what's around us?

As I've gotten older and near middle age, I've noticed that I and other adults have come to accept different kinds of harm to other animals and the environment as unavoidable or intractable problems and just the way things are. We come to know our place in the world—what's familiar, what

we'll tolerate, what we'll ignore, what we'll devote our love and attention to, how our living involves accepted kinds of harm. The harms we delivered on other species as kids, without an awareness of what we were doing, evolve into other routine kinds of harm—some of which I explore with you in the pages of this book—and I invite you to consider the kinds of observations that I share that have evolved over my life and brought me to the particular questions I have now, questions that have both come out of and led to a certain attentiveness.

How can attentiveness to our everyday encounters with other animals help us to understand the relationships of harm and care in which we're embedded whether we've noticed or acknowledged them or not? How can we look askew at mundane and taken-for-granted relationships with animals—running over them on roads, eating them, testing on them in labs, exterminating them—in order to understand the fundamental nature and effects of these relationships in a new light?

Practicing the attentiveness needed to begin to answer these questions is a first step. After paying closer attention to the smallest things or beings in the world around me—making attentiveness a *practice*—my days now are filled with “*I wonders . . .*,” an at-times relentless flood of curiosity and questions.

I was finishing writing the draft of this book as the third summer of listening for the sound of the crows' feathers came to a close and autumn began. Earlier that year, the family had disappeared as they do in the spring, stopping by on occasion, individually or in pairs, to see if there were any snacks to be had in the garden or to soak something they flew in from somewhere else (like a crust of bread or the foot of a sparrow) in the birdbath. But I still had trouble recognizing who was who when they weren't there together as a whole group. They were tending their nest, in some configuration of co-parenting, as had happened the year before.

I was left to wonder where their nest was, how they were faring, how many bluish-green eggs they had laid, how many would hatch, and how many fledgling crows would make it to adulthood. There was mystery and some magic, too, in their disappearance, and in the feelings of wonder, the not knowing, the quiet hope for their well-being and safety, the eager anticipation of their reemergence as a newly formed family.

I continued to leave treats in their bowl, and individuals of the family continued to stop by, but our relationship felt more distant to me. They were focused on other, more important things. As spring turned to summer,

I started to hear the unmistakable scratchy calls of baby crows around the neighborhood on my walks. I watched as other parents raised their young. I waited, eagerly, for the crows on our block to reappear as they had the summer before with their fledglings. But they didn't come. I waited. The summer passed, week by week, and they didn't reappear. I wondered what had happened. Had none of the babies survived that year? Had they decided our block was no longer the place to raise their young? Had something happened to the parents?

As the crows became less frequent visitors, other birds became more at home in our garden. The Steller's jays and the scrub jays—each their own hues of brilliant blue—swoop down into the yard to retrieve a peanut or an almond. They travel in troops—four Steller's jays or a trio of scrub jays suddenly appear in the tree all at once. The Steller's jays are more brazen, flying toward me the moment I step out the door, landing on a tree branch within reach, screeching their distinctive screech in my face. The tiny pine siskins and purple finches and wrens and chickadees come by and forage for bits of food on the ground and in the bushes. A single pigeon sometimes stops by, and I wonder about their flock. Squirrels hop confidently along the top of the fence, nibbling on the remaining apples on the apple tree and burying food throughout the garden. A rabbit squeezes under the fence, looking for some greens to eat. Someone comes by at night—a raccoon probably—and dirties the clean water in the bird bath.

Within this vibrant multispecies community, as autumn is in full swing and we move into winter, only a single pair from the family of crows remains. I wonder who they are. Are they the original pair of parents? Did the young crow from our first summer together find a mate and decide to settle here in this territory? Were these the surviving two of the three fledglings from our second summer together? Or were these, perhaps, someone else entirely?

Whoever they are, I am glad for their presence. But I also feel a sense of loss. I felt an intimacy with this evolving family of crows—that we were sharing food and feathers, yes, but also that we were sharing something more. Companionship on our walks. An exchange of *bellos* when I saw them foraging for grubs in the grass across the street. Long hours spent in the front garden watching each other, curiously trying to understand one another. I felt even a sense of intimacy in knowing somehow that they understood me so much better than I would ever be able to understand them. It was the feeling of being surprised to learn how well someone else knows you, how carefully they've paid attention to who you are, to what

matters and has meaning to you. There is a great intimacy in that—in being known, in the attempt to be understood.

And yet, this intimacy with the crows came not from a deep knowledge of each other but from the consistent effort to try to know each other on our own terms—without my imposing on their lives, trapping them, banding them, keeping them captive in a lab, invading their territory, studying them, quantifying their behavior with meticulous scientific methods, as humans often do when trying to understand another species. What this family of crows and I crafted together was profoundly imperfect and unsystematic knowledge. It is overwhelmingly partial and entirely incomplete. They allowed me a glimpse of their world, and although I felt and still feel an intense desire to know more—to know everything about them—I think part of cultivating attentiveness is honoring the things we cannot know, respecting the secret lives of others all their own.

In this effort, how do we let attentiveness guide the work of gentler, more radically caring world-making? How do we come to know other animals differently, not through relationships of harm and violence but through tender acts of appreciation and care for what they might need to flourish—within, in spite of, and outside of interactions with humans?

Can we appreciate other species and accept that we may never fully understand them—and that our inability to fully understand them should not be justification for exploiting and harming them? Can we orient ourselves in and through the opposite: That we err on the side of respect for the radical alterity of their being, humbly recognizing our own limitations and our own lack of understanding? Can we sit, carefully, in a state of unknowing?

And ultimately, can we accept that even when someone else is unknowable—even when we can't even scratch the surface of what we think we can know—they are owed our full support in their flourishing?

These questions are grounded in the mundane moments of encounter we have with the world around us. The beginnings of answers to them, I think, can be illuminated by the tiniest, most everyday acts of attentiveness, of noticing, of working little bit by little bit on repair.

This is the project I've undertaken in *The Sound of Feathers*. The chapters that follow evolve across the fleeting encounters, the closest-in relationships, the entanglements of intentional harm, and the possibilities for greater attentiveness, care, and respect. Some of the animals I write about are ones I have encountered only in passing, but they have

made their mark and shown me something important about the structures of power and violence the human world upholds. Other animals in the book are those I have lived with and been in complex relationships of care with for many years. And then there are those animals with whom I live in close proximity, not in intimate relationships of care but in ones of eradication and harm.

These encounters, although often involving painful stories about violence and the effects of power, raising fraught ethical questions, also offer storied windows, I hope, into new forms of care, flourishing, and multi-species kinship.

Careful attentiveness can enable this kind of storytelling. I hope this book offers a starting point for bringing attentiveness to multispecies relationships and thinking critically and carefully about the ways that we ourselves are engaged in relationships of harm and care. Perhaps reflections on our own implicatedness and our own critical attention to the ways we inhabit the world might help others to think differently about theirs. Perhaps, together, a tapestry of accounts of attending more carefully might help to transform our shared futures in ways we can't yet imagine.

I've done a lot of research for this book, devouring written accounts (both academic and nonacademic) of history, animal behavior and emotion, political economy—all kinds of topics that took me down rabbit holes of excavating written forms of knowledge, as well as fieldwork in spaces of animal life and death. This helps us understand the complexity of what we're seeing and where these relationships are rooted, historically and in contemporary society. Meticulous research is important and illuminates whole new depths of knowledge—it grounds our wonder in a set of existing knowledge that can guide our thinking and actions. But the truer and more fundamental element here is that act of paying attention, of developing greater sensitivity and curiosity about what's right around us. It's the spark of wonder that ignites our ability to begin to understand more deeply and narrate our connections with and our disconnections from others in caring, violent, or indifferent ways.

This is a storytelling practice and many of us know how to observe the world around us, to think about what it means, and to weave beautiful stories. As multispecies beings, living together in all this messiness, we are all the authors of these stories. We live in stories. Our lives are stories that unfold over time. All of us—human and nonhuman—know beauty and pain, love and sorrow, and rage and joy. We experience the toll that living in the world today takes on our bodies and minds and the way we

are differentially affected by structures of power. We know what it feels like to be connected to others and to experience the loss of others. This is the stuff of what it means to pay attention. This is the substance of the stories we can tell, the questions we can ask, the more vibrant futures we can imagine.

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LISTENING FOR THE SOUND OF FEATHERS

Notes

Introduction. Listening for the Sound of Feathers

- 1 Marzluff and Angell, *In the Company of Crows*; Marzluff and Angell, *Gifts of the Crow*.
- 2 Odell, *How to Do Nothing*, 81.
- 3 Horowitz, *On Looking*, 263.

1. Knowing Our Haunted Homes

- 1 Marx, *Capital*.
- 2 See Moreton-Robinson, *White Possessive*.
- 3 For discussions of how anthropocentrism might be defined and understood, see Calarco, “Being Toward Meat”; Collard, *Animal Traffic*; Probyn-Rapsey, “Anthropocentrism”; Srinivasan and Kasturirangan, “Political Ecology.”
- 4 TallBear, “Indigenous Reflection,” 234. See also Goldberg-Hiller and Silva, “Sharks and Pigs”; Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*.
- 5 See Cacho, *Social Death*.
- 6 Much attention has been given to constructions of race, for instance, in the United States in the binaries between white people and Black,