

Jay Hansford C. Vest

Song of the Rain Crows

They had cried all summer to break the drought, we knew them as rain crows, tree frogs, vermin elevated up the trees into the ordered cosmos to create monsters like the Uktena—winged serpent or tornado—and the great water bird Thulawana—hurricane—but they had worked too hard and Florence came from their creation with Michael on the winds behind her. Countless little rain crows hopped and crawled through the parking lot lining the entryway into the supermarket. One old fellow, a Lumbee uncle, I mused, hopped from foot to foot trying not to step on the little creatures, saying over and over, “Israelites, Pharaoh’s plague,” as he looked on at the tiny creatures flooding into the market. Not an indigenous story, I thought, but it was the best he could do; where are your stories? Where are your values, I silently marveled, while trying to avoid stepping on them but there were just too many crowded into the space and no way to avoid them.

At the checkout, a little girl—Lumbee, no less—had stepped on one and was screwing her foot down so as to squash it. She was just a child knowing no better, and as Lumbees seem to have no idea of a Native metaphysic of nature in respecting the spirits and all, I smiled at her but it was more a grimace in my heart. She looked at me and repeated the episode with another tiny rain crow that had successfully entered the market to flee the storm. I wanted to say but child they are your friends, but I held my tongue to just smile at her innocence. Still I thought Indians—even Lumbees—should know better than to abuse the spirits, nature persons, in that way.

“They are your friends, honey, especially when there is a drought. They call the rain for us,” or so I finally muttered. She should know better, I thought, but her mother making no effort to instruct her too the problem, so I inquired mentally, Where are your stories and the uncles to teach you? Long lost to colonialism and an inadequate meld of culture. It was disconcerting, as I recalled the stories told me by Uncle Finn when I was her age: “Rain crows are our friends; they bring an end to the dog days of summer. Those hot muggy days when you cannot sleep.”

As I tenderly walked back to my auto, I recalled a Cherokee

reference to a “Sally Rain Crow,” giving a historical referent to the little spirits within her surname. Hence, I mused, the traditional ethos was not dead among them.w

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