

THE SCARECROW'S INAMORATA

Robert Borski

YES, IT'S TRUE WHAT THE CROWS SAY. My heart is filled with straw, my brain is imminently combustible, and I hang from a gibbet in a field of green, like a criminal, legs broken and dangled beneath me. It is also not blood that animates me, but the wind, such brief motion being just enough to scare away all but the more brazen of birds. Were it not so, I fear I would be cast down and recycled into pasturage, the ultimate loser's fate for beings of my kind—a guardian of the stalks one day, then chaff for some ruminant with grass breath the next.

Still, why rue tomorrow when today will do just as well?

For despite the rustic splendor of my surroundings, there is only so much company one can derive from the comings and goings of field mice and piratical crows, from repartee between sun and dew, from the cyclical and intimate caress of June. This is why I always look forward to visits from the farmer's daughter. I call her Little Miss, and even if she is not born of loam, she's a fabulous concoction, as golden and sweet as a golem of honey. Unlike her father, she talks to me as if I were not a creature of dried grass, pins paper valentines to my bibs, and replenishes my frame with handfuls of thatch (the bulge in my overalls is her doing alone).

"There you go, Scarrow. Now you have a heart and a man-root to make babies with. Too bad I'm engaged to the Prince of America. I could be your bride otherwise. If you'd like though, I could still give you a hug and a kiss, and we could be pretend-boyfriend-girlfriend."

As her bubble-gum flavored lips brush mine, I smile the only way I know how: with the fixed intensity of feigned life.

"Oh," she says, picking a loose strand of straw from the right side of my chest, then braiding it into a ring for her finger, "is that for me? Why thank you, Scarrow."

And yet despite these various intimacies, it is not she I yearn most for—at least not of late. It is her small, enigmatic, traveling companion. Though quieter than nightfall, with jet-black eyes and a permanent smile, she has just begun to accompany Little Miss in her rounds and almost always arrives in tow, being dragged along like a pouting stubborn child.

Flash
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*I hang from a gibbet
in a field of green,
like a criminal,
legs broken
and dangled beneath me.*

Spots of color blaze in her cheeks and like me, she's clad in faded hand-me-downs.

"This one here's a real bad character, Scarrow. She puts sand burrs in Papa's underwear and spits in Aunt Lily's special medicine." Here, frowning, she pauses to look back at the dark frame of the farmhouse, which lingers like a malign toad against the hillside. "She's not really my aunt, you know. I just have to say that because she brings me presents. That's where this raggedy doll comes from. Probably not even store-bought, you ask me. And not even Aunt Lily knows her real name. Say hello to Bitch, Scarrow."

According to Little Miss, who harangues "Bitch" the same way the blackbirds curse me, the doll's miscreant deeds have been wrongly attributed to her, earning her undeserved punishments, like no television or ice cream. It's hard to believe she's as bad as Little Miss alleges, however, and I try to communicate this to my sister mawkin by semaphore and blown, mote-bestrewn, kisses. As the sun is my witness, I swear she understands how smitten I am and between sharp outbursts and cuffs to the face from Little Miss engages me in the same wordless dialogue.

It may not be your idea of love, but over the next several months I continue to see my darling inamorata with some regularity, at least until the bright sheen of August when suddenly Little Miss stops bringing her. I wonder about this falling out, of course. Has some sort of illness claimed my cloth poppet? Was it something I did or she said—some silent gesture or ill-timed remark? But whenever I seek to elicit any sort of helpful response, no answer seems to materialize from either Little Miss or the world at large, only the dry chirp of crickets or the wind's haunting susurrus.

Then one damp day in October, with the combines tire deep in red mud, the crows, for a promise of lookaway stillness, bring me a gift. I do not recognize it at first, but reeking of trash, with a ketchup stain in her lap, and eyes shorn free, it is she. My darling girlfriend. Blind, savaged, and as devoid of vitality as last year's cornstalks.

You may not believe this, but I wept then, though my tears were more like an eruption of dry motes than anything lachrymal.

*"She's not really my aunt, you know.
I just have to say that
because she brings me presents."*

That night, as I struggled to cope with my loss, the farmer and his companion put in a long session of spading and burying, finishing only as the sun rose, chasing the silver moon from the sky. Below me, as the crows cawed their morning epithalamion, a nuptial bed of dirt and lime now embraced my shadow.

Sometimes, for us creatures of the field, love, if as vital as rain, can be evanescent as dew. In other words, you accept whatever gratuities nature is kind enough to bestow upon you, wherever and whenever.

For despite what she said earlier, it appears Little Miss and I were meant to be lifelong companions, after all—and like the corn I was erected to safeguard, I must remain ever vigilant if I'm to protect her from further predation by hungry crows. 🦉

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Robert Borski lives in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, and as a gangly, ragtag teenager was known as "Scarecrow." His writing has appeared in F&SF, Analog, Talebones, and Strange Horizons. He is still gangly at 58, but has added a beer belly for counterbalance.

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