

When Crowbar Came

from *The Tarantula in My Purse*

by Jean Craighead George
illustrated by Greg Newbold

Genre

Narrative nonfiction recounts a true event or series of events. As you read, note how the true events of this selection are being told like a story.

Are crows intelligent animals?

Jean Craighead George lived in rural New York State. Her three children were Craig, Twig, and Luke. The George family often took in wild animals in need of aid. Some of the animals the family helped were a robin named Pete and four crows named Bituminous, Light Foot, New York, and last of all, Crowbar.

SEVERAL YEARS AFTER Light Foot, Bituminous, and then New York came and went, Crowbar came into our lives.

Craig found him on the ground in a spruce grove. A violent windstorm had knocked bird and nest out of a tree. Craig looked around for his parents, saw none, and tucked the almost-naked nestling into his shirt and carried him home.

"His name's Crowbar," he said as he put him on the kitchen table. The little crow was somewhat younger than New York had been when we brought him home, and so we knew this bird was going to be more deeply imprinted on us. He would indeed be a member of the family.

The scrappy little crow looked at us, rolled to his back, and clawed the air as if to tear us to pieces. He screamed like an attacking warrior.

I went to the refrigerator, took out a cold cheeseburger, and stuffed a bite in his mouth, pressing it with my finger to make sure he swallowed. He did, and instantly changed his tune. He blinked his pale-blue eyes and got to his feet. Taking a wide stance to keep from falling over, he fluttered his stubby wings. In bird talk this means, "I am a helpless baby bird—feed me." We fed him until he couldn't open his beak.

At the end of the day we had a pet crow. Crows are smart. They know a good thing when they see it.

But it was not just the food. He was young and craved our attention. He cuddled against Luke, begged until Craig petted his head and chin, and dropped spoons and forks off the kitchen table until someone talked to him. He was ours, and he let us know what that meant.

He did concede one thing to his heredity, however: He slept in the apple tree outside the kitchen window. This greatly pleased me. Although a red fox named Fulva; two mink, Vison and Mustelid;





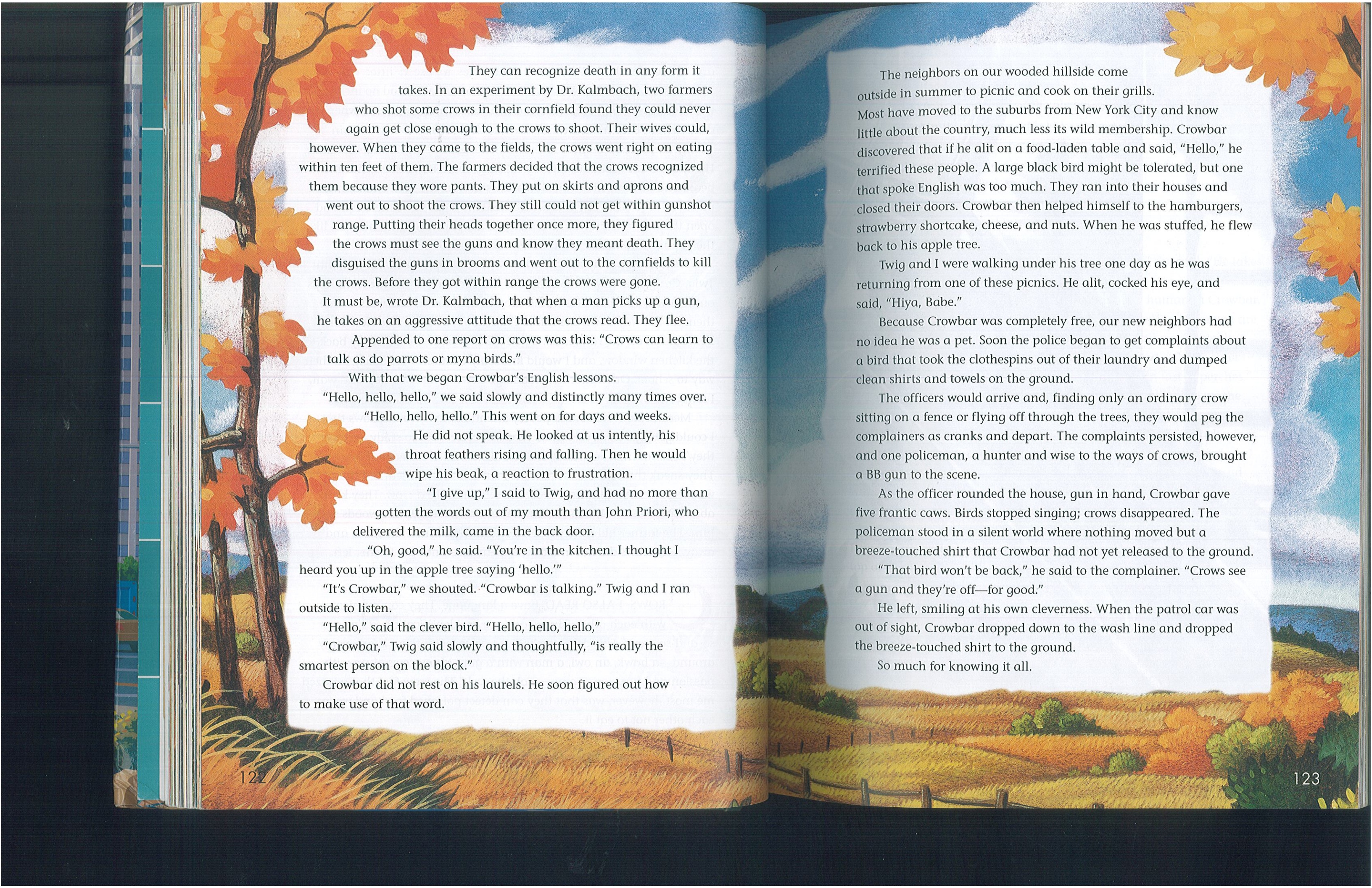
and three skunks had trained themselves to use a litter box while in the house, Crowbar, New York, and our other crows had no inclination to do so. Fortunately they spent most of their time outside, and when they did come in, they treated the house like their nest and kept it clean.

By autumn Crowbar was Crowbar George to Twig, Craig, and Luke. He would wake them at dawn by rapping on their windows with his beak. The three would come downstairs and set the table, including a place for Crowbar. They would scramble the eggs, serve them up, and open the window. Crowbar would fly to his plate and gulp his food like the young gluttonous crow that he was.

Then he would fly out the window to the apple tree and wait until Twig, Craig, and now Luke came out the door and down the front steps on their way to school. He would drop to the ground and walk beside them all the way down the hill to the school bus stop. Like New York he would sit on the rail fence. When the bus came, he would fly back to the kitchen window, and I would know my children were safely on their way to school. Other mothers had to go down to the bus stop and wait. I sent a crow.

Meanwhile I was reading every scientific paper about crows that I could get my hands on. I read that crows are hard to study because they're so smart. They easily elude and outwit the observer. They hide. They sneak through tree limbs. They count. A farmer learned that if he went crow hunting in the woods, he would not see a crow. They knew about guns. To foil them, the farmer took a friend into the woods with him. The farmer hid and the friend walked out across the fields and away. The crows did not make an appearance until the farmer left.

CROWS, I ALSO READ, have a language. They communicate with each other. Three caws are an identification—"I'm so-and-so crow." Five desperately given caws mean there is an enemy around—a hawk, an owl, a man with a gun. Many caws given with passion and fury say "Come—mob the owl." The crow fact that amazed me most, however, was that they can detect poisoned food and warn each other not to eat it.



They can recognize death in any form it takes. In an experiment by Dr. Kalmbach, two farmers who shot some crows in their cornfield found they could never again get close enough to the crows to shoot. Their wives could, however. When they came to the fields, the crows went right on eating within ten feet of them. The farmers decided that the crows recognized them because they wore pants. They put on skirts and aprons and went out to shoot the crows. They still could not get within gunshot range. Putting their heads together once more, they figured the crows must see the guns and know they meant death. They disguised the guns in brooms and went out to the cornfields to kill the crows. Before they got within range the crows were gone. It must be, wrote Dr. Kalmbach, that when a man picks up a gun, he takes on an aggressive attitude that the crows read. They flee.

Appended to one report on crows was this: "Crows can learn to talk as do parrots or myna birds."

With that we began Crowbar's English lessons.

"Hello, hello, hello," we said slowly and distinctly many times over.

"Hello, hello, hello." This went on for days and weeks.

He did not speak. He looked at us intently, his throat feathers rising and falling. Then he would wipe his beak, a reaction to frustration.

"I give up," I said to Twig, and had no more than gotten the words out of my mouth than John Priori, who delivered the milk, came in the back door.

"Oh, good," he said. "You're in the kitchen. I thought I heard you up in the apple tree saying 'hello.'"

"It's Crowbar," we shouted. "Crowbar is talking." Twig and I ran outside to listen.

"Hello," said the clever bird. "Hello, hello, hello,"

"Crowbar," Twig said slowly and thoughtfully, "is really the smartest person on the block."

Crowbar did not rest on his laurels. He soon figured out how to make use of that word.

The neighbors on our wooded hillside come outside in summer to picnic and cook on their grills. Most have moved to the suburbs from New York City and know little about the country, much less its wild membership. Crowbar discovered that if he alit on a food-laden table and said, "Hello," he terrified these people. A large black bird might be tolerated, but one that spoke English was too much. They ran into their houses and closed their doors. Crowbar then helped himself to the hamburgers, strawberry shortcake, cheese, and nuts. When he was stuffed, he flew back to his apple tree.

Twig and I were walking under his tree one day as he was returning from one of these picnics. He alit, cocked his eye, and said, "Hiya, Babe."

Because Crowbar was completely free, our new neighbors had no idea he was a pet. Soon the police began to get complaints about a bird that took the clothespins out of their laundry and dumped clean shirts and towels on the ground.

The officers would arrive and, finding only an ordinary crow sitting on a fence or flying off through the trees, they would peg the complainers as cranks and depart. The complaints persisted, however, and one policeman, a hunter and wise to the ways of crows, brought a BB gun to the scene.

As the officer rounded the house, gun in hand, Crowbar gave five frantic caws. Birds stopped singing; crows disappeared. The policeman stood in a silent world where nothing moved but a breeze-touched shirt that Crowbar had not yet released to the ground.

"That bird won't be back," he said to the complainer. "Crows see a gun and they're off—for good."

He left, smiling at his own cleverness. When the patrol car was out of sight, Crowbar dropped down to the wash line and dropped the breeze-touched shirt to the ground.

So much for knowing it all.



Crowbar Goes to the Bank

THE SANDBOX WAS CROWBAR'S FAVORITE SPOT. When Twig and Craig played in the sandbox with Luke, they dumped into the sand a bucket of glittering spoons, bottle caps, toy soldiers, coffee cans and lids. At the sight of the sparkle, Crowbar would materialize from the trees and join them. He walked around forts and castles, picking up bright treasures and carrying them to the apple tree.

One day as I was working at my desk, Twig came to the door of the sunporch, her hands on her hips.

"I'm not going to play with that crow anymore," she said. "He takes all my toys."

I smiled. Here was my Twig. She was seeing the human in Crowbar. But she did have a point, after all. It must be maddening when you are counting on shaping a castle turret with a spoon and a crow steals it.

"Why don't you slide down the slide?" I suggested. "Crows can't slide down slides. Their feet have pads that hold them fast to perches."

She went back to her brothers, and the next time I looked up the three were sliding down the slide.

Then down from the roof sailed Crowbar. He swept his black wings upward, then down, and alit on the top of the slide. We all stared. Would he slide? He stepped on the steeply slanted metal board—and was stuck. Twig waved to me; I waved back to her. We had outwitted a crow, which we both knew was a very hard thing to do.

No sooner had we gone on with our businesses than Crowbar flew to the sandbox. He picked up a coffee-can lid, carried it to the top of the slide, stepped on it, and—*zoom*—we had a sliding crow.

CROWBAR WAS INDEED A CHARACTER. In the morning when the children were in school, he would sit beside my foot when I was working at my typewriter and brood over it. He would lift his feathers and lean against my ankle as if it were some cherished object. Sometimes he would go into a trance and fall over.

Unaware that I was being used, I would pick him up and pet him. He would make soft noises, then hop to my desk and fly off with

a paper clip. I would laugh, knowing I had been had—but I never did. He repeated this game many times, and I always fell for it. When school reopened after spring vacation, Crowbar began to disappear every day at noon. He would walk to the open door, fly to the ash tree, and sneak uphill into the woods.

For hours I would neither see nor hear him. I assumed he was resting quietly in some leafy tree, which birds do for longer periods than most people realize.

One day a little neighbor girl, Sally, came to my door.

"Mrs. George," she said, "I think Crowbar has enough money to buy a sports car."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"He comes down to the middle school every day for lunch," she said. "We feed him sandwiches and throw him our milk money. He picks up the money and flies off with it. He must be very rich."

"The middle school," I said, and remembered the crow's-eye view of the ecosystem. Of course: While soaring above the trees, he had spotted the kids and their food and shiny money. I wondered what else Crowbar knew about our town. He probably knew about the baseball games and picnics, the people getting on and off the trains, and the town dumpsters. But apparently most fascinating to him were the kids at the middle school eating sandwiches and flipping shiny coins into the air, and so it was to them he went at noon.

"We can't find where he hides his money," Sally went on. "Could you help us?"

"I'll try," I answered dubiously, "but crows are clever. He may be investing it in Wall Street."

She didn't laugh, so I answered more seriously. "I'll meet you on the playground tomorrow at noon, and we'll see what he's up to."

Crowbar was walking among the children when I arrived. Sally saw me and came running. Crowbar, who undoubtedly knew I was there, ignored me. A boy waved a coin and spun it in the air. When it sparkled to the ground, Crowbar hopped upon it and took it in his beak.

When he had a beakful of money, he skimmed low over the grass and laboriously climbed into a sugar maple tree that edged the playground. He looked as if he had stolen the crown jewels.



"See?" Sally said. "He hides the money, but we don't know where. He won't hide it while we're watching."

"He sure won't," I said, "Crows are very secretive. Other birds' nests are easy to find by following the parents when they are carrying food home to the young. But not crows.

"They won't go near their nests while you're watching. Those bright coins are kind of like Crowbar's nest. He doesn't want you to find them."

"Seems so," said Sally. "He waits till the bell rings and we have to go inside; then he flies away and we can't see where he goes."

The bell rang, Sally dashed off, and I sat down to see if I could outwait my friend. I could not. After half an hour I gave up and went home.

About a week later I came out of the bank, which is next to the middle school, and saw Crowbar flying low over the recreation field, laboriously carrying his load of quarters and dimes.

I stepped back into the doorway. He flew over the fence and the parked cars, then swept up to the rainspout of the bank. He looked around and then deposited his money in the bank's rainspout.

There is something uncanny about crows.

NEW YORK GAVE ME MY FIRST EXPERIENCE with this otherworldly attribute.

One afternoon the director of the Bronx Zoo and his wife, who were friends of my aunt and uncle, came to visit. Mrs. Tee Van was a very accomplished nature artist, and I was flattered that she would come calling. The day before, I had returned from a speaking engagement and had brought home to Twig the hotel shampoo, soap, and shoe-shine rag. She had put the shoe-shine rag in the dollhouse that stood on the porch.

We adults sat down in the living room to get acquainted. The children and New York played on the porch in view of us. At one point

in the conversation Mrs. Tee Van looked out the window and saw New York walking on the porch railing. She smiled when she saw him.

"I had a pet crow when I was young," she said, and walked to the window. "I adored him. He was so clever." She paused. "Your crow's legs are so shiny. How do you manage that?"

Hardly had she spoken than New York flew to the dollhouse, picked up the shoe-shine cloth, and walked with it in his beak slowly along the porch railing.

Dr. Tee Van and I chuckled, but Mrs. Tee Van did not. She turned to me, visibly upset by what seemed to be a crow answering her question.

"We must go," she said. "That's just too uncanny."

"A funny coincidence," I said, forcing myself to laugh.

"No," she answered. "Crows are eerie. We have a lot to learn."

A Crow Kidnapping

CROWBAR STAYED. Two and a half years had passed since he had joined the family. After Pete left, he strutted down to the bus stop on school days, kept me company, and flew to the middle school at noon to call on his moneyed friends.

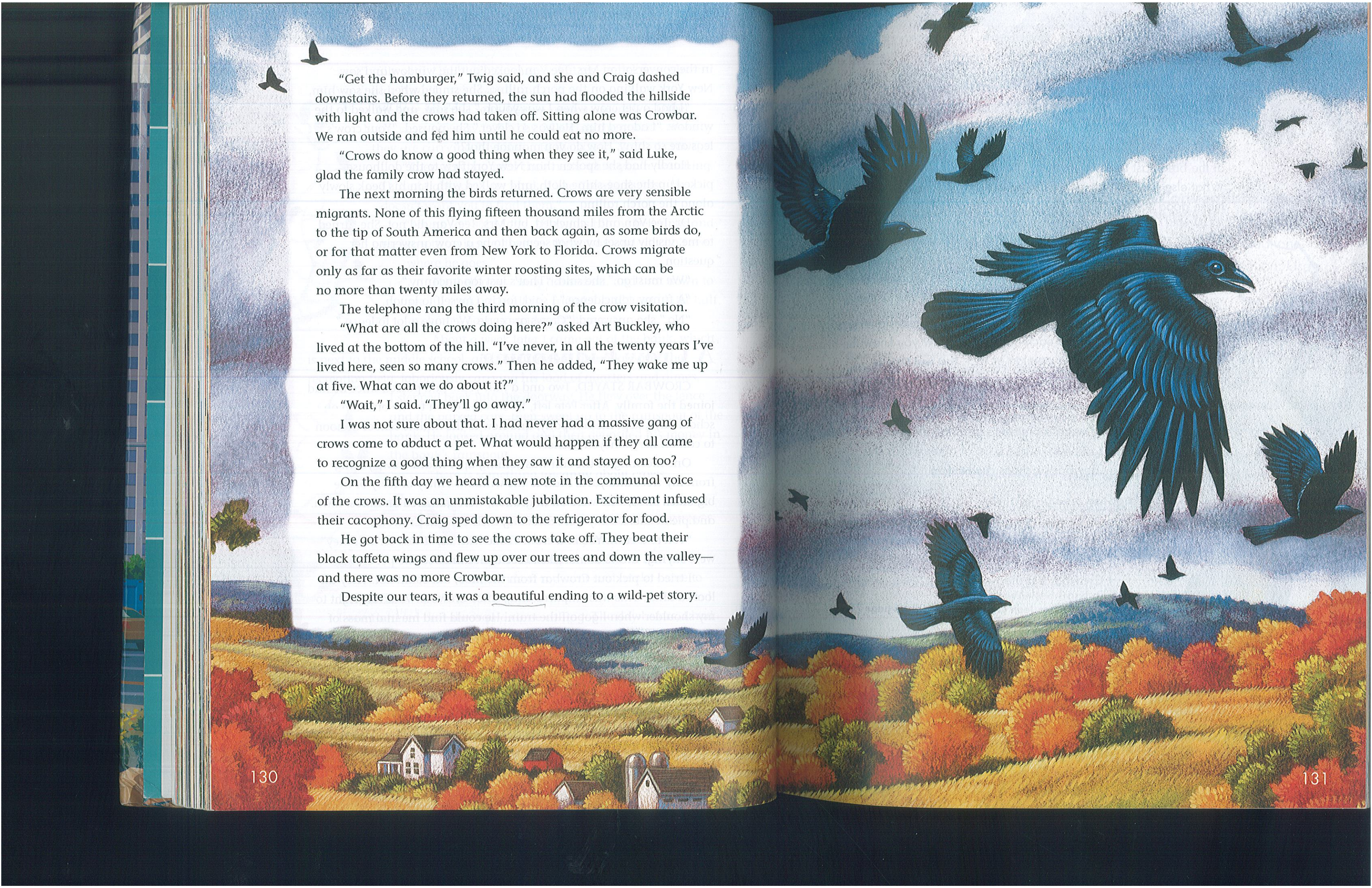
One morning as the sun was coming up, I heard crows yelling from my trees and yard. I ran to the window. Thirty or forty of the big black birds, who were on migration, were gathered on limbs, lawn, and picnic table. They were directing their caws at Crowbar.

"You're a crow. You're a crow. Come with us," I was certain they were saying. Crows do not like to see their kind become pet crows.

I tried to pick out Crowbar from the mob, but could not. They all looked alike. This was embarrassing, since Crowbar would fly right to my shoulder when I got off the train. He could find me in a mass of humans, but I could not find him in a crowd of crows.

The kids awoke, and we hung out the windows watching the drama below.

"He's going to go away with them," said Luke when the chorus rose to a frantic pitch.



"Get the hamburger," Twig said, and she and Craig dashed downstairs. Before they returned, the sun had flooded the hillside with light and the crows had taken off. Sitting alone was Crowbar. We ran outside and fed him until he could eat no more.

"Crows do know a good thing when they see it," said Luke, glad the family crow had stayed.

The next morning the birds returned. Crows are very sensible migrants. None of this flying fifteen thousand miles from the Arctic to the tip of South America and then back again, as some birds do, or for that matter even from New York to Florida. Crows migrate only as far as their favorite winter roosting sites, which can be no more than twenty miles away.

The telephone rang the third morning of the crow visitation.

"What are all the crows doing here?" asked Art Buckley, who lived at the bottom of the hill. "I've never, in all the twenty years I've lived here, seen so many crows." Then he added, "They wake me up at five. What can we do about it?"

"Wait," I said. "They'll go away."

I was not sure about that. I had never had a massive gang of crows come to abduct a pet. What would happen if they all came to recognize a good thing when they saw it and stayed on too?

On the fifth day we heard a new note in the communal voice of the crows. It was an unmistakable jubilation. Excitement infused their cacophony. Craig sped down to the refrigerator for food.

He got back in time to see the crows take off. They beat their black taffeta wings and flew up over our trees and down the valley—and there was no more Crowbar.

Despite our tears, it was a beautiful ending to a wild-pet story.