

chapter 13. to hold the past

She did not have to glide for long, scarcely a hundred breaths.

Crow leaned back and spread her wings wide while extending her talons out and downwards, then touched down gently on the edge of the cliff. Pebbles, knocked loose by her landing, rained down behind her and careened off the side of the cliff, tumbling down into the mist far below.

Unbothered, she pressed forward twelve paces and into the trees, then onwards from there, guided by an instinctual yearning for her destination. She simply **felt** the right way to go, as if she was returning to nest after a cold-season spent away.

In a way, she was.

Which, perhaps, is why she hung by the side of the moss, talons pressed tight into the gap between the leaf-litter and the clearing where she **awoke**. She leaned forward into it, looking all around, as if to find someone to grant her permission to enter. In the center of it, she could still see the imprint where once she laid {lie?? had lain??}.

Then, a gust of wind blew her, and only her, from behind, pushing her, stumbling, over the edge and onto the mixture of mosses and wildgrasses that once she had called home. And, slowly, she crept over it, talons retracted, padding so carefully, so thoughtfully, with every step, until she came down kneeling by the very place she had **awoken**.

She was so much different, now.

Crow crawled down into the imprint and lay {lied??} in it. She fit fully inside of the hollow left by the torso of who she used to be.

Looking up into the sky, she began to wonder. What was she, back then? What had she thought? What had she felt? What had she known? Was it anything?

Looking back within herself, it was so far away that she could no longer see it. The only link to her, then, would be where she found herself now. Even so far apart, just standing in the same place, separated only by the passing of countless moons, she felt closer to herself than she ever had before.

Maybe that, then, was **it**?

If she could know who she had been, then surely, she could know who now she was meant to be.

But she would not start here, no. Honestly... she did not want to see what she looked like, again, back then. Defensively, she tugged at her eyepatch, making certain that it was secured well over her metal eye.

It had been harrowing enough to leave that flesh behind. She could not welcome it back within her mind. At the very least, not yet.

Crow flopped her head back and turned it to the side, and from there, she spied a craggy outcropping of the mountain through the gaps in the many trees. She was so sure, before, and while her resolve had not changed— something else within her certainly had.

There was this grip on her heart, cold and icy, and heavy. But, too, it was comforting. It was a deep-seated part of herself, somehow roused, and she focused on the feeling, trying hard to find a name that suited the way her whims had turned.

Longing? Yearning? Both close. *Both?* Far closer. Ah. No, she knew this feeling, and had known it always, but for it, there was no name. There were no words that could hold all its meaning at once because its meaning was far too basic for language to hold.

What she felt was like grief, like loss, like any other kind of pain, held together wistfully, blissfully, peacefully, held so close and so tightly that it might burn, but it was too cold to, any heat from this feeling had long-since died out or burned away to ash. Now, instead, it was a cold-brand on her heart, an ice bath for her soul. It was both clarity and acceptance, while itself disguised in smog and always shifting.

And even without its name, she knew it well, for to know it was to live.

That, then, was what she felt, and what she saw before her. And that, she supposed, was why she had not yet risen. It was not a lack of strength, nor a lack of will, but simply... she was calm, here, with her feelings.

So far away from the world, so close to the answers she sought, so subsumed by the past as she was, all the urgency had been swept away by the tides of her subconscious.

Still, though, she sought answers.

And with a calm mind and readied body, she rose, then stepped, then stepped again, and stepped again, and again, and again.

It would just be foolish to wait any longer.

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Crow's left hand meandered along the swirling stripes of brownstone that made up the mountain's base. It was porous, crumbly stuff blown smooth by wind long, long ago. To her fingertips, it was like silk. She had always loved the feeling of rocks.

Oh. Had she?

Crow shut her eyes in concentration as she walked, focusing deeply on the sensation of the grainy-soft stone as her fingers glid across it. *Have I always loved this?*

Eyes shut, focusing deep within herself, she noticed a deep well of calm and positive nothingness. The same feeling as... a simple nodding of the head. Truth. It felt true. Yes!

Crow smiled wide and opened her eyes.

Then, somehow embarrassed, the smile dripped off her face and melted away into a wibbling little frown. It was not right for her to grin so widely about something so stupid. It was nothing to be so overjoyed about. She had named and placed a feeling.

Then floated in an errant thought,

Nothing of note.

Now, she noticed, her whole body felt *bad*, achingly so, and some tension had worked its way not only into her flesh but also into the very air around her. She had just been so happy..?

And another,

I truly cannot comprehend your theatrics,

Crow pressed on towards the cave and shook the thought away, but another fell into its place,

*It is not the first of such circumstances, as you well know. **And yet,***

"**Shut it!**" Crow hissed under her breath. As she hissed, she snapped her beak and threw her gaze to the ground, seething, breath falling out, hot and heavy.

She had stopped moving forwards.

Before her was a tall rocky outcropping made of boulders that had fallen together or found each other after having been freed from the mountainside.

Tentatively, she stepped forward and brushed her hand across them, then dug down with her fingers, pulling herself up, up, and up again. The exertion was worth it, and the sweat stole her problems away all at once.

And, as she crested the top of the boulderpile, she finally saw it:

WELCOME HOME.

It was just as she had seen before, in her dreams. And as she blinked, she saw it again, so clearly— the hazy message, the smooth stone walls, lined with traces of her. The dust, the ash, as the last pieces of her crumbled away and flew away in the wind.

Her eyes snapped open, focused and sharp. She was in the waking world, now, which meant...

there was no going back. Whatever she learned would be hers forever.

However it changed her would be final.

Like the first life taken—

Crow hopped onto a pebbled slope and slid down with the rocks to the ground.

—this was one of those things from which there was no return. Of that, she was certain.

And still, she approached the mouth of the cave.

Would she still be Crow?

Did it.. matter?

Crow reached up and held the smooth stone wall of the cave between her palm and fingers.
She stared, fully fixated, at the stone. How many times had she touched it, already?

How could it feel so familiar?

Why, here, did she, for the first time,

feel as though she had finally returned home?

Crow turned on her talons abruptly and hopped into the cave, eyes squinted mostly-shut so as to prevent herself from seeing any of the paintings too soon. If she made these, there would be a beginning.

All things had a beginning and an end.

She wanted to start at the beginning.

That way, perhaps she would be able to **understand**.

She *had* to.

This was one of those things for which there was only one try.

And, sooner than she had expected, she arrived,

at the end of the cave,

and the beginning of her own story.

Crow took in a deep, heaving breath, then let it all out. At the same time, she skewered a glow-worm, fastened the pouch shut, then flicked the worm to the ground.

[*inhale*]

Deftly, guided by intuition and instinct, she reached her hand out to one side. Perfectly, her fingertips met the smooth haft of a sealed and treated wooden pole. She hefted it up and smashed it down into the glow-worm. There, she pulverized its corpse, grinding it into paste, which she then rolled the end of the stick in before lifting it back up.

The paste began to spark and pop before suddenly igniting into hissing yellow flames, in the light of which, she spied countless stains from glow-worms past. She could not help but smile at the sight of it.

[exhale]

Finally, she turned her attention ahead.

It was definitely the beginning of things, as no shapes or swirls lead to it, but many rushed from it, reaching out in all directions towards the rest of the cave where countless other paintings lined the wall. She followed the trails with her flesh eye, then snapped her attention back to the main piece, over and over again. No matter how she looked at it, she always found her gaze being turned away, as if repelled, *no— drawn—* towards the paintings that came after.

But she was determined, and she held her head still, forcing her eye to stare straight into the center of the painting, to make sense of it, to **understand**, as she had every right to by her very nature.

There were only four colors in the first painting, though it was hard to make out exactly what the colors were through the monochrome yellow light of the glowworm. It seemed, though, to be the same white as her feathers, the black of the abyss, the grey from their mixing, and the brilliant scarlet that coated the world just before night fell.

Here, in the painting, was a floating island of white in a great basin of black that spread over everything. Pieces of the island chipped away and fell into the black. Great holes and chasms scarred its surface, but deep within the island, at its heart, was a great graystone wall. The darkness licked up the sides of the walls, but ultimately, could never wrap all the way over them.

And, held within the walls, was a great white-and-gray tower that pierced far, far above into the abyss that held the island from all sides. At the top of the tower, shining out in all directions, was a deep scarlet glow that cut straight through the darkness and illuminated shapes of creatures and buildings all along the island.

There, far below the tower, illuminated by one of its many rays, were six black silhouettes holding hands.

WELCOME HOME, she thought,
and she reached out on instinct alone.

Crow's fingertips glided over the silhouettes, taking note of their pasty, chalky, coarse, and grainy texture. They were so captivating. Her whole body resounded with warmth and recognition and yearning—

so she pulled her hand away and pressed her flesh eye up to the rocks, peering at the figures from scarcely an antslength away. They were more bones than flesh, just lines to suggest the shape of beings, and no more.

So how could she miss them so strongly?

Without thinking, without further feeling, for she could help herself no longer, she reached up to her eyepatch and plucked it off in haste, ripping it straight through her tangled hair's knots and balling it up in her hand.

Immediately, her eye started acting up, whirring and moving all at once. Her vision was hazy, fading, pulsing, and all of a sudden she was wobbling as the ghosts of the past and the past of this room and the afterimages all washed over and around her, and up became down and down up as she spun and eventually fell, hard, on her ass, onto the hard and rocky floor of the cave. Her head still spun, so she leaned it back against a rock and closed her flesh eye, while trying to **remember** how it felt to **focus**, to hone in on how she once **looked** into the **past**.

She would see it once again.

She *had* to.

Crow focused deeply on the tattered shape of a self long-past, of the painter of the painting, of the scraps of dark cloth that danced in front of her like a cobweb weaved from shadows cut and waving in the wind.

The muscles holding her metal eye in its socket, still weak and newborn, trembled and shook with the effort, and her vision rattled and jumped around as the eye's aperture flicked fully open, then shut, then open again, whirling all around, searching for a thread of the past to follow back into it.

There.

The side of the painter's face, pale and frail and ancient.

She saw it for half a moment but knew at once that never would she forget it. Written on her very soul, she searched for it with the eye, forcing it to look further, and further into the past. The eye took something from her, something important, and she felt herself drifting, mentally, like when she was asleep, or scared, or altogether gone.

So, Crow sat up straighter, leaning forward onto her paws, legs crossed, neck craned up and back, head tilted to the side to provide her eye the perfect view so that it could pierce—

and all at once, the shadows parted,

and in an instant, she was there again,

humming, and whistling, and bobbing up and down, dancing to her own song on her own time

in her hand, the brush flicked and streaked across the stone wall,

*and her hands were stained, like bruises, with a mix of all the pigments she had brought,
and her face was happy, though resigned to fate,
she had the look of someone that had already left this life behind.*

Tears slipped out around Crow's fingers where she held her flesh eye shut, but she kept watching, entranced, beholden now, only to the spectre of her self.

This is what she had been looking for in her reflection.

Her lips parted, mouthing something, but what, Crow could not tell or hear. The music, too, had faded, and now, she stood silently, painting, stroke after stroke, building up the world of the painting in the cave.

*Her face was as white as Crow's feathers. She had neither wings, nor claws, nor even talons, or a beak. She simply... **was**, and even so unadorned,*

Crow, for once, finally understood.

*No matter how she changed, she could never look the way she wanted to,
she would never be able to feel the skin and bones that should be hers.*

No matter how many incisions were made, she would never be able to sculpt out the self trapped within.

The truth was not that she had tried and failed to look the way she wanted,
but that she never even had the chance to.

She wasn't even the right kind of base, dear reader.

And in so chasing the ephemeral image of the self that never existed, she understood the real meaning of it: the act of mourning, and grieving, so powerful that it drove her to cut into her flesh, over and over again, allowing herself to be hacked away and destroyed and replaced with new parts and pieces, over and over again,

all because she was in mourning all along.

But if she could not look the way she desired,
then why could she not desire the way she now looked?

How could it be that her understanding of its futility did not snuff out what remained of her desperate hopes?

Did she even have an option?

When others died, their mourners had no option but to weep, didn't they?

But she was the one that had died.

By the nature of her own birth, she had died, before ever she had a chance to live.

And so the tears flowed, and kept flowing, and she made no effort to stop them, because two things were finally true:

1. she understood why they fell— this was somewhat common—
2. for once, she agreed that they ought fall.

And so they did.

With nothing else to do, she simply pressed her back to the cave's wall and stared at her self trapped within the past. It was nice to just watch her paint.

It was, she knew, the closest she would ever get to what she truly desired.

If she could not be her, then instead, she would at least see her, until she had burned the image of herself into her mind.

Then, *maybe*, she could at least be herself within her dreams.

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Did her life matter, if she had already lived?

Her ghost seemed rather satisfied, really.

Didn't that make her a bit... redundant?

Perhaps not, if she judged by the number of paintings.

There were 81.

She sat with that information for a long time after she had finally finished counting them. Each painting was a different life lived, of that, she was now sure.

That made her not Crow, but Crow-82, a fact that made her want to spit in disgust.

She was the **one** named Crow.

There should not have been so many of her.

What did it even imply, that there was?

Was each version of her somehow more broken than the last? Or was the first version the most broken, with each iteration since spent fixing some part of herself?

How could it take so long to get something as simple as a single life correct?

Deep within, curled up in some dark, lonely corner of the cave, free of paintings, free of the past, Crow sat, reflecting. She **felt**, down to her marrow, that each and every Crow before her had failed at something, but at what, she did not know. She barely knew anything about them, but having scanned their paintings, in each and every one, she found profound sadness, a longing unfulfilled, each painting left unfinished though seemingly whole.

She knew the truth, though. Each and every time, the brush was retired so close to the end.

Did her past selves not know how close they were?

Or had they each seen what was ahead, and chosen to turn away from it?

Crow did not know which was worse, and so she believed neither. Ignorance, after all, was bliss.

It was a shame she could not stay ignorant. This, unfortunately, was one of those scabs she would surely pick at until it scarred or the infection killed her.

Ah. She thought, rising slowly. *So that is what has happened, then.*

This answer was simple, so she chose to believe it:

once the truth had been uncovered, each and every Crow had been unable to let sleeping dogs lie, and so, they were hounded unto death. She could feel a discomfoting, prickling sensation spreading all across her flesh as she remained here.

Some things, she supposed, were better left uncovered.

She had been doing alright on her own, hadn't she?

She had even learned how to **feel**.

So what use would it be to turn to the past? To mire through all that darkness? To put a spotlight on every rotten thing she had done, on every beautiful thing she had forgotten?

Was it not better to simply move on without it?

Crow stood at the mouth of the cave on spikes that might serve as fangs if indeed the rocks sprang to life beneath her. She balanced on her talons, soft flesh held just above the sharp points of the mouth's fangs, and there, swaying in the light breeze like a high branch of a tree, she let her mind fall empty.

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For a hundred breaths, she stayed like this.

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I can be anything, can't I? Crow wondered, looking down to her paws. Surely, I have taken as many forms as there are moons in a year.

There was a nagging pain in her chest.

*Then I shall be the **one** called Crow.*

Crow hopped off the spikes and onto the dirt outside of the cave, and slowly, she began to walk.

As she left it behind, a distinct pull, a tug like heavy winds, formed around her waist and reached up around her chest like a harness, trying to drag her back into the dark cave that held her past, her truths, the answers she had ever long-sought before even she knew to question.

Her eyes were too dry and puffy, her throat too parched, for any tears to fall, but still she whimpered, and still, her lips trembled, quivering with ever greater force as she left the cave behind, then farther behind, and farther still.

Now, her whole body burned and itched, and she knew why. She really, really knew why, and still,

she rebuked it.

Really, what was she *supposed* to do?

After seeing just one painting, just *one* version of herself,

she— she—

she—

Crow clenched her fists and stormed further into the woods. She did not bother to dodge the brambles, nor move her head aside from the vines and leaves.

What has become of your so-called 'flame', hm?

Shut. It.

Or *what?*

Crow kept clawing her way deeper into the woods, dragging herself along with her claws. Now, she slashed at the plants and cut her way through, deeper, and deeper still. It did not matter if she got lost.

She already was.

There was nothing left for her, anyway.

That's not true, now, is it?

What could possibly be left for me?

Well, for starters... the truth.

Inexplicably, her face began to sting, then, burn with flush heat.

The past is just... too... much. It's too— I can't— when I— it's just—

Crow fell to her ass where she was and scooted her back up against the nearest tree, then slammed her head back into it, over, and over again. The pain cracked and spread across her skull, and her eyes, closed, relished in the radiant frilled waves of red that washed across her blackened vision. It felt so nice.

Thump, thump, thump,

so soothing,

thump, thump,

so...

She was just so tired.

So, so...

Crow slumped forward, then leaned to her side, and fell, writhing, on the ground, in the dirt.

so sleepy....

she curled up into a ball, twitching, shivering. It was all so much. The feelings were so fresh and real and overwhelming, it was all she could feel, but in so feeling, it was all she could feel, but so overwhelmed by feeling, she was forced to **feel**, and feel, and feel, and feel, and she felt so much that she could just

pop!

She wished some monster of the wilderness would come and crush her already, so that she would be free of this.

She had to be free of this.

Crow rushed to her feet and ran through the woods, flicking her hands, shaking her feet, hopping, occasionally stopping, just to let her arms and hands shake uncontrollably, flicking out her feelings, and when it wasn't enough, she turned her claws on herself and rocked in place, banging her head against the nearest tree,

lightheaded, now,

she needed to **die**.

She had to **Die**.

She just couldn't handle this anymore,

You already have.

Crow stopped. Her feelings did not, but she did, and she lifted her chin up to see the full moon once again.

It was so beautiful.

We should go back to the cave.

There is no 'we', how many times do I have to—

Eventually, you'll be right.

Crow stopped, stunned. They had never agreed before: her, and that voice in her head, the one that always intruded, always interrupted, always found new ways to cause her grief.

What?

Let's go back to the cave.

No!

Why not?

Because I'll die?!

That didn't stop you the other 80 times.

Crow rolled her eyes and pushed on further through the woods.

You just want to cause me pain. I'm not going to listen to you.

You're only in pain because you don't.

I hate you.

I know.

And yet you stay—

It's not like I can go.

You just said that one day there will be no we. You're going to go.

Really, I'm not going anywhere.

So you were lying?

*No, for fuck's sake, would you just stop running and **think**?!*

*The idea of it burned her. Thinking was what caused all her problems in the first place.
Thinking led to feeling, and feeling led to...*

Crow began to scratch at her cold and bumpy flesh yet again.

What did you think I meant when I said there'd be no 'we'?

That I'd finally manage to kill you, and I'd finally get to live in peace in my own fucking head.

Because that's been working so well for you?

I just haven't figured it out yet.

You don't really do much figuring, you know.

There you fucking go again—

No. **Shut it.**

Crow's rage flared inside of her. How dare **it** tell her what to do,

Absolutely fucking no—

There will be no 'we', because one day, you'll sort your shit out, and I'll become a fleeting memory.

How do I do it?

*Oh, so **now** you want my help?*

Anything, anything at all, to get rid of you.

You're so single-minded.

Crow began to giggle, and so strongly, that she had to stop and hold herself up. Ah,

What's so funny?

Single-minded is the only thing I wish I was.

We are not two minds. You know better.

If we were of one mind, you would shut the fuck up.

You're so close to getting it.

What?

We're already one mind, Crow.

What the fuck are you talking about? How could we— Crow slammed her fist into the nearest tree and let out a heavy, shaking breath. The feelings were still so fucking heavy. She could not stand this burning, this aching, this bulging feeling of her flesh wanting to burst out and break free of her. All you do is hurt me, and you dare claim that we are one? We are not even kith, let alone kin, let alone bound.

Is that so?

IT IS!

Crow.

Don't fucking say it.

How could you know what I am going to say, if we are not one mind?

Crow grasped her head and pulled at her hair. She sunk down, deep, all the way down to her talons, squatting. She pressed her beak between her thighs and shut her eyes, then ran her hands up through her hair and pinched her ears together and pressed them shut against her head.

Crow.

DON'T FUCKING SAY IT.

We. Are. Each other.

And so, she called upon their **sympathy**, and the bond was formed, but in the same moment, she severed it, unwilling to let it happen.

We both know that a binding only forms if—

You aren't a part of me.

Okay. Okay, Crow. Why not?

Because I would never hurt myself, on purpose, over, and over again, even when I'm told to stop, even when I know I should, even when everything is falling apart, I wouldn't barge into my own mind and cause myself more pain to drown myself in, because I would have the common fucking sense to stop and pay attention to what's actually going on, to what's actually—

Then what, little Crow,

are we doing right now?

Crow froze. And, pulling her hands from her head, then untucking herself, and finally, allowing herself to open her eyes,

she

looked

down

at her

paws.

They were bloody.

And she was in pain.

And she was alone in the woods.

And, finally—

Okay.

Just like that? Herself asked Crow.

Okay. Crow repeated.

Thank you.

It was nothing, Crow thought, with wide-open, hollow eyes, staring at her blood-stained fur. *She'd really hurt herself, huh?*

We have been, for a while. It's... I don't want to say it's okay, but—

It's okay. We'll heal.

Yeah. Yeah, we'll heal.

Sorry for um... everything.

It's okay.

It's— is that true? It can just be okay?

Who else has the right to forgive you for what you did to yourself, Crow?

Crow's feathers bristled in recognition. Her fur stood up on end. Many of the feelings had fallen away.

It's okay, Crow. We'll say it together. Ready?

No.

Her self, mentally, began to giggle. Her mouth opened.

"Dear Crow," she started, adjusting herself to sit more comfortably among the leaf litter and moss. She pulled her cloak around herself, and pulled her knees up to her chest, curling up in a tight ball.

"This feels so silly." She giggled.

The voice remained silent. No.

She was choosing to remain silent.

She was no longer chiding herself for being silly, for procrastinating.

Come on, Crow,

She nodded.

I can do this!

And then, she smiled, and finally,

she began to speak at last:

"I forgive you, Crow. I forgive myself. The world is confusing, and I was confused. The world is painful, and I was in pain. Pain is... was... the only thing I was really feeling, I think.

And it's comfortable to feel, you know?

It's far more comfortable than to feel nothing.

Perhaps because, in death, there is nothing to feel.

I suppose I would know.

So, perhaps, to feel nothing,

makes me feel closer to death?

So, it's, well, it's...

it's uncomfortable to feel nothing, because it's like being dead,
and I don't want to be dead. I just wanted to feel real. Alive.

Um. Sorry..." Crow said, hanging her head in defeat.

You can do this. You're so close.

Crow shook her head and turned her chin up and to the side, glancing out into the forest. The trees shifted and swayed in the breeze, rustling and creaking as they were wont to do.

She couldn't do this, after all. She didn't have the words, she couldn't find them, it was just... she wasn't ready, you know?

Crow.

The voice in her head was different, now. Stronger. She felt herself looking forward, again, and her eyes drew to a focus on the tree in front of her.

What are you waiting for? Permission? You have it. Strength? You've found it, time and time again. Rest? You'll have it, one of these days. That's a guarantee.

But it wasn't any of those things, and it wasn't *not* any of those things, it was just, *everything*, sort of, it was everything and anything and it was so confusing and muddled and she didn't

even know, anymore, what she was struggling with or why she was still stuck flying into a headwind, held in the same place for eternity.

She wanted to live, but loved that her dreams were like a preview of death. She wanted to breathe, but always tucked herself into the tightest spaces she could find. She wanted to be free, and yet, she only made choices that kept her trapped.

She just wanted to be comfortable.

She thought she was comfortable.

But none of this, she realized, was comfortable. There was nothing comfortable about anything she had been doing. There was no comfort in the way she had been living. In fact...

the only comfort she had found, recently, was when— it was—

It was only when she left herself behind did she find comfort. The more she was herself, as she was now, the less she found herself happy. But the more she rejected the self, in pursuit of... herself? The more—

no, that was just as confusing, wasn't it? She was so—

Crow.

Her mind stopped racing, again, and she found herself focusing on the tree in front of her for one final time.

You're never going to be ready.

She flinched, and pressed herself back into the bark behind her.

And you know it's true.

In shame, she tilted her head down, just a little bit.

Do you know what you need, Crow?

"No."

You need to stop lying to yourself.

Was she crying again, or had the tears never stopped falling? Everything was falling into place so quickly, all at once, and how could she even trust this voice in her head? It was like she was slipping, again, and again, like she was falling, perhaps, and—

CROW.

She froze.

We're ready, okay?

"Okay," she whispered, nodding her head, more seriously, now.

Now, let's start anew. Always and ever forwards.

Now, Crow. Now,

tell me,

how does our life begin?

Crow took in a deep, shuddering breath, and held it for a long, long while.

Then, she turned her head towards the dirt and let her breath fall out, hot and heavy.

"We begin by turning the page," she whispered,

"moving always and ever forwards,

onto the next chapter of our life."