"the crow and the snake" by Joy Harjo

The backyard patio had become the oasis for the neighborhood birds. The crows, starlings, sparrows, and pigeons met there early every morning for gossip, their morning baths, and their first meal of the day, attracted by the dog's food and water supplies. As with all creatures, some left refreshed and got on immediately with the business of the day, while others couldn't get enough dog chow or gossip as they lazed around all afternoon, hopping around the patient and lonely dog who didn't seem to mind the noisy gathering or sharing his food and water.

One day the very busy humans who lived there thought things had gone too far. The dog's fresh water had become the bathing system for hundreds of birds, and though the birds are relatively little they scattered dog food all over the patio and made a terrible clutter. The humans were tired of cleaning up bird mess and the clatter of gossip broke their sleep and set their teeth on edge. So they had a meeting to figure out what to do.

Snakes were one of the most feared enemies of the birds and they were few and far between in this city. Cats were the most common enemy, one they battled daily, but no cat would venture into the dog's territory. He was a huge dog and his greatest weakness was chasing cats. He would break off a leash, leap over the wall at the sight of a cat. It was a compulsion with him, though he never got close enough to catch one. He convinced himself it was the chase that really mattered. It was deeply satisfying like nothing else. So as the birds talked, lazed, and bathed he dreamed of chasing cats.
 The humans decided to buy a huge rubber snake to frighten the birds. They weren't sure it would work but they were willing to try anything. That night they curled the snake into an alert circle next to the food and water supplies. The next morning they awoke to the alarmed cries of the birds, who were disturbed at the presence of this predator next to their favorite hangout. The birds cried "snake" in their various languages and gathered in the largest tree high above the house, above the patio, dog and humans and now the invader snake, which had ruined their prized meeting place. They discussed the situation for several hours, sent scouts down to see if they could find out anything about the kind of snake it was, where it came from, its intentions, and its plans for leaving. The snake was silent, stealthy and so controlled it could appear dead. These were the most dangerous.

Now the birds would have to go back to their old routine in which they raided dog and cat dishes in scavenger groups of two and three birds all over the neighborhood. It was a tricky business to run the gauntlet of cats, and humans, particularly the young human males. In this house they were protected by the dog, who had actually learned their names and inquired after their families. And the humans had been tolerant in the beginning.

The dog didn't fear snakes; he didn't see any reason for alarm. The snake didn't bother him, nor was he too friendly. He came to miss his bird friends, who, though they were often a nuisance, even standing on his back and wakening him while he was in the midst of a particularly delicious dream chase, were his friends. The humans were glad that the snake trick had worked but had to admit they missed some of the storytelling of the birds, particularly that of the crows, whose language was closer to human languages.

For a long time the birds stayed away, though sometimes they would fly by the patio, nostalgic for the good times, the stories seemed to naturally arise after a good meal, a good bath.

The oldest crow, who happened to be the wisest (and this isn't always the case), had this gut feeling that something was strange about this snake who suddenly appeared on the patio. He was like the others who when they saw the snake were guided by the primordial knot in the brain that said "run." There was no thinking involved, instinct took over the muscles, brain, and heart.

He, too, like the others would reminisce about the good times. That was the place he had met his favorite wife, a beautiful shiny one who had a gift for finding prized bits of food. She always gave him the best pieces and they had great times together the few years they had and loved watching the sunrise together. She was killed by a cat who stalked her while she scavenged the trash cans in the alley. He never paired with anyone else after that, preferred to contemplate the deeper meaning of life and picked the scab of his sorrow as he lived at the edge of his crow community.

He knew this wasn't all there was, this struggle for food, territory, and survival in a city that kept churning up more trash. Dreams came to him and gave insight into the history of crows and possibilities for their evolving place in this world. The respect for his knowledge grew in the birds' worl, even as he contemplated the appearance of the snake, an event that destroyed a happy rhythm in their lives.

No one thought to further questions the identity of the snake, to understand why the snake did not move and kept silent vigil at the water and food oasis. The old crow decided to solve the mystery. He knew he would die soon and he was too wise to fear death. If it be by snake, so be it.

Without the knowledge of the others the crow began to keep vigil and stood on a chair in the patio watching this snake. The humans saw him, perceived him thinking, measuring and weighing the curled snake. Even they were impressed by the wisdom in his eyes, the careful way he observed and pondered the monster that had changed his world.

He walked around the snake, then touched the dreaded enemy and stepped back, blinking his eyes as he waited for the strike. He touched the cold snake again. Nothing! He then kicked at the snake. Again, nothing! This snake was not alive, never had been; they'd been fooled by the humans. Before traveling to call a meeting to tell the others he stopped for a bite to eat, a bath, and a visit with the dog, who greeted him warmly.

The bird meeting went long into the night and ended with a bitter disagreement and a separation between those who thought the crow was lying, because they had seen the snake themselves and they were going to believe what they saw, and those who believed the wisdom of the crow and prepared to return to their beloved meeting place. Those who thought the crow was lying wished to protect their friends they thought were foolish for wishing to believe what they considered a lie. When they could not garner agreement they turned and walked away and were never seen again by those who believed.

The next morning a few birds were gathered at the meeting place though they were raw with the hurt of the separation. They bathed, ate of the plentiful dog food nuggets, and recounted the history of the place and discussed what they had learned.

The humans saw that the crow had discovered the secret of the snake and took it back into the house. They often looked for the wise crow and would catch a glimpse of him once in a while; then there came a time they never saw him again.

And it was never quite the same in that neighborhood for the crows, pigeons, starlings, and sparrows, or the humans and the dog, who missed his old crow friend. But there were new creatures born: human, dog, and bird, and they were always told the story of the birds and the snake.