

# A Translation of and Reflections on Kenji Miyazawa's Short Story 『鳥の北斗星』

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## The Great Bear<sup>1</sup> of the Crows<sup>2</sup>

Cold mean clouds<sup>3</sup> hung so close to the ground<sup>4</sup> it was impossible to tell whether the fields were lit up by the white light of the snow or that of the sun. Grounded by the cloud cover, the crow volunteer fleet<sup>5</sup> could do nothing for the moment but take up emergency anchoring and wait for the cloud to clear. They lined up in a row in the snow-covered paddy field, its surface shining as if covered with sheets of galvanized steel.<sup>6</sup> Sitting at anchor, none of the fleet moved in the slightest.

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<sup>1</sup> The Great Bear is the name of a constellation visible throughout the year in the northern hemisphere (it is also known as Ursa Major, which is Latin for 'Great Bear'). Its seven brightest stars are known in North America as the Big Dipper because they look like a large ladle (or 'dipper'), and are known as the Plough in the United Kingdom.

<sup>2</sup> The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines a crow as 'a large perching bird with mostly glossy black plumage, a heavy bill, and a raucous voice.' In Kenji's story his crows use their voices to great effect, not only to communicate with one another, but also to harry their enemy, the mountain crow. According to Wikipedia, 'Crows live in complex, hierarchic societies involving hundreds of individuals with various 'occupations', and have an intense rivalry with the area's less socially-advanced ravens.' (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crows> )

<sup>3</sup> The clouds are described as being 意地の悪い which might translate as 'mean' or perhaps even 'moody'. But apart from their preventing the crows to take off, there seems to be nothing 'mean' about them at all.

Even the young head of the fleet, the pitch-black, smooth-plumed crow captain<sup>7</sup> stood stiffly to attention, not moving a muscle.

The crow admiral himself remained motionless the whole while, not even batting an eyelid in spite of his advanced age. His eyes were now ashen, and whenever he cawed, his voice would rasp like a cheap doll.<sup>8</sup>

Once a child who obviously knew nothing about crows<sup>9</sup> had said, “Hey, you know what? We’ve got two crows in this town with sore throats!”

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<sup>4</sup> 地べたにすれすれに垂れました: in the very first line of the story we find an example of the 擬態語 which appear so often in Kenji’s works (and which can be so difficult to convey into English). How should we translate すれすれ?

<sup>5</sup> Here we see the first use of military vocabulary in the story. It is surprising to find the birds being described as part of a naval fleet. It would be more natural to see the crows as belonging to some sort of air force division. However when the story was written (in 1921), Japan did not have an air force. In 1904 the Japanese navy had shown its might by attacking Port Arthur at the start of the Russo-Japanese War. But even given this consideration, it is odd that Kenji thought of comparing crows with naval ships. Why the crows should be the volunteer fleet (義勇艦隊) and not a conscripted force is again worthy of note.

<sup>6</sup> Kenji describes the snowy surface as shining like sheets of galvanized steel (亜鉛の板) and this use of imagery will be repeated throughout the story. Perhaps the steely shininess of the snow is there to remind us of the steel used to make the ships of the naval fleet.

<sup>7</sup> Kenji gives his crows ranks, and they have the attributes of any well-trained military outfit: they stand tall and do not fidget (しゃんと立ったまま動きません).

<sup>8</sup> Nowadays it is not unusual for dolls to have voices. From my limited experience of such things (gleaned from watching TV adverts at Christmas time when I was a child in the 1970s), I vaguely remember there being a string attached to the doll’s back; when this string was pulled, the doll would ‘speak’. No doubt today there is something much more sophisticated involving a computer chip. More to the point, though, is the question: Did such ‘talking’ dolls exist in Kenji’s day? An intriguing thought. Perhaps Kenji means the crow admiral’s voice made a noise similar to the noise made by a badly made doll (assuming the doll was made of metal and the metal parts grated together when a child played with the doll). In the original it says 悪い人形のようにギイギイ云います; it is doubtful that the ‘badness’ referred to here is of the “Barbie knows she shouldn’t play with Bobby. Barbie is a bad doll” variety. It must mean ‘badly made’ or (as I have translated here) ‘cheap’.

The child was clearly wrong. There was in fact only the one crow, and that was the admiral. He did not even have a sore throat. It was just that his voice had grown tired<sup>10</sup> from too many long years spent shouting out orders up in the sky. And it was for this very reason that all the crows of the volunteer fleet considered the admiral's voice the sweetest sound they knew.

Sitting at emergency anchorage in the snow, the crow fleet looked like pebbles or perhaps even sesame seeds. Seen through a telescope<sup>11</sup> they looked like potatoes, some of them big, some small.<sup>12</sup> Gradually nightfall approached.

At last the clouds began to clear, rising just enough to allow the crows to take wing.

In a breathless voice, the admiral gave the order:

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<sup>9</sup> 鳥の年齢を見分ける法を知らない一人の子供 is an interesting phrase: 'a child who cannot tell the age of a (given) crow'. Perhaps Kenji and his friends in Hanamaki spent much time looking at the crows in their neighborhood, and had learned to tell them apart and to tell their relative ages. But to most readers today, especially in Tokyo where people say you should never look directly at a crow (just in case your eyes meet!), this kind of knowledge sounds highly arcane. Hence I have translated this section somewhat freely to make it read more naturally.

<sup>10</sup> Kenji tells us that the admiral's voice has grown 'rusty' (錆びた). This maintains the metal theme that began with the snow looking like steel, but I have gone for the more prosaic 'tired'; the word 'rusty' in English can be used figuratively to describe a skill that has not been used much recently, and which has as a result become less proficient (e.g. 'The last time I went to Germany was years ago, and my spoken German is now so rusty, I doubt I could even order a round of drinks'). To describe a voice as rusty would imply in English that to some extent it had not been used for some time, which is the opposite of what Kenji intended here; the admiral has used his voice so much it has lost its power.

<sup>11</sup> This is the first mention of optical aids in this story. After this telescope (望遠鏡), we will read of a pince-nez (鼻眼鏡), and finally of some night-vision binoculars (夜間双眼鏡). Kenji was apparently a great collector of new gadgets.

<sup>12</sup> The landscape described is almost without colour; it is as if seen in black and white, with the black bodies of the crows outlined against the white of the snow-covered fields or the cloudy sky.

“Commence manoeuvres! Move out!”

The fleet commander took the lead, beating his wings against the snow as he flew up into the sky. The eighteen ships in the captain’s division followed one by one, maintaining a suitable distance between them.

Next the thirty-two strong battle fleet set off, shortly to be followed by the dignified shape of the admiral. Circling above them the captain had already completed four wide sweeps of the sky, going as far as to touch the tip of the cloud base, and now he set the course, heading straight ahead towards the woods.

Twenty-nine cruisers followed by twenty-five gunboats, all set off one by one, up into the sky. The last two ships set off together, the only blemish in an otherwise copybook operation.

The captain of the crows flew up to the wood before veering off to the left. As he did so, the admiral gave the order, “Cannons, fire!” The massed ranks of the fleet all fired at once.<sup>13</sup>

“Craw! Craw! Craw! Craw!”

One of the ships jerked its leg back as it fired its cannon; it was still smarting from a wound it had received at the recent battle at Nidanatora.<sup>14</sup>

The admiral made four wide sweeps of the sky before thundering out the order to withdraw.

“Ranks, retire!” With that he peeled away and returned to his official residence in the cedar tree.<sup>15</sup> All the crows broke formation and went back to their barracks, all except the crow captain who instead flew off by himself over towards the honey locust tree in the west.

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<sup>13</sup> The crows’ cannons are their voices. The sound they emit as they ‘fire’ their cannons is no doubt a frightening weapon in itself, but their cannons are in effect firing blanks. It is only by using their beaks that the crows can kill the mountain crow.

<sup>14</sup> Nidanatora is clearly not the name of a place in Japan; it does not sound typically Japanese and is written in *katakana*, the phonetic alphabet used to transcribe loan words and foreign names. Later there is mention of the Sepira mountain pass (again written in *katakana*). Kenji seems to want his story to take place in a country that cannot be clearly identified.

The clouds were almost black, and only over the western mountains could a pool of gloomy pale blue sky be seen peeking through. A silvery star began to shine, a star the crows called 'Mashirii'.<sup>16</sup>

The crow captain flew as swift as an arrow, alighting on a branch of the honey locust tree where for some time now, a second crow had been quietly sitting. It was obviously worried about something. It was the captain's fiancée, the gunboat with the most beautiful voice in the whole fleet.<sup>17</sup>

"Craw! Craw! Sorry I'm late. Aren't you tired after today's manoeuvres?"

"Craw! I've been sitting here waiting for you for a while, so I don't feel tired at all."

"That's good. Look, darling, I'm afraid I'll soon be going away for quite some time, leaving you on your own."

"Oh my goodness! Why? This is terrible news!"

"The battle fleet commander has told me that tomorrow I'm to set off after the mountain crow. It'll be my job to track him down."

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<sup>15</sup> Apart from the woods there are three trees mentioned in particular in this story: a cedar tree, a honey locust tree, and a chestnut tree. In each case the tree has a different category of occupier: the admiral has his quarters in a cedar tree; the captain's fiancée sits in the honey locust tree; and the mountain crow perches in a chestnut tree. Whether we can read anything into this remains to be seen. It does seem more than just a coincidence that these three very different characters should all sit in different kinds of trees.

<sup>16</sup> According to Johanna Fischer (*Die Früchte des Gingkos*, published by Verlag Günther Neske, Pfullingen, 1980), this is most probably meant to refer to the planet Mercury.

<sup>17</sup> Kenji's descriptions of his female characters are always worth some careful consideration: here we have a female crow who has a beautiful voice, is young (we later learn), and is engaged to be married to the hero of the story, the crow captain. On the face of it, she could be the heroine of any bog-standard love story ever written. But there is more to it than that: she is enlisted in a volunteer fleet; she is a gunboat, and is therefore presumably prepared to kill; she is not waiting at home for her man (or crow) to return, but is there in the same fleet, lining up alongside him in battle. She is a very modern heroine. It is also a very modern touch to have the crow navy willing to accept women recruits.

“That mountain crow is supposed to be very strong.”

“That’s right. His eyes stick out, his beak’s narrow, and he looks a bit arrogant. But he won’t be a problem.”

“Are you sure you’ll be all right?”

“Of course, I’m sure. But this is war after all so you never know what might happen. If the worst does come to the worst, I want you to find yourself a good husband.”

“Oh, it doesn’t bear thinking about! This is simply too awful for words! What am I to do? *Craw! Craw! Craw!*”

“Stop crying and pull yourself together, someone’s coming!”<sup>18</sup>

One of the captain’s subordinates, the crow sergeant came rushing over and saluted, his head slightly tilted to one side.

“*Craw!* It’s time for roll call, captain. Everyone’s ready and waiting.”

“Thank you, sergeant, I’ll rejoin my unit immediately. You can fly back now.”

“Right you are, captain,” the sergeant said and flew off.

“Come on, don’t cry. We’ll see each other again tomorrow at roll call. Now look after yourself. I should be getting back. They’re already calling the roll. Give me your hand.”

The two birds grasped each other tightly by the hand.<sup>19</sup> Then the captain pushed off from the branch and hurried back to rejoin his troops. His fiancée sat there as if frozen to the branch, not moving at all.

Night fell.

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<sup>18</sup> The dialogue between the two lovers is not the story’s strongest suit. The captain shows a very British stiff upper lip, and seems annoyed and embarrassed by his fiancée’s emotional outburst.

The clouds had all cleared away, leaving the sky, which shone like freshly molten steel<sup>20</sup>, full of an ice-cold light. A few small stars joined together before exploding, and the axle of the water wheel squeaked as it turned.<sup>21</sup>

Suddenly a crack appeared in the thin steel of the sky, splitting it in two. Long threatening arms reached down through the crack and tried to catch hold of the crows and carry them off to the far side of the heavens.<sup>22</sup> The crow volunteer fleet were now all busy with their battle preparations, hurriedly pulling on their black long johns. They took off into the air, circling the sky in a flurry of feathers and flapping wings. There was no time for brothers to keep a watchful eye on their siblings. In the melee and confusion, even lovers sometimes crashed into each other as they rushed about.

No, that is wrong. It was not like that at all.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This might be the last time these two lovers ever have alone together and it does seem rather chaste of them to part with nothing more than a firm handshake. I suppose one needs to take the mores of the time Kenji wrote into consideration, but even so this seems to outdo that classic English film “Brief Encounter” for its restraint and suppressing of emotions. The image of two crows shaking hands does not succeed in conveying the strong emotion they must be feeling. Love scenes are evidently not Kenji’s cup of tea. In fact, if anything, this scene is rather surreal: after all, crows do not have hands.

<sup>20</sup> Another reference to metal. The snow and now the night sky are likened to steel. A few lines on we read of the ‘thin steel of the sky’.

<sup>21</sup> The squeaking of this water wheel echoes the noise of the crow admiral’s voice. The sudden appearance of the water wheel is curious. It is not referred to again, and seems to serve little purpose in the story (beyond providing some background noise). Presumably it is man-made, but by whom? There are no humans mentioned anywhere in the story. Johanna Fischer surmises that this must refer to the ancient Chinese concept of the universe as a wheel with an axle in its centre.

<sup>22</sup> This surreal touch of the arms reaching down from a crack in the vault of the heavens is remarkable; suddenly the story has taken on a nightmarish quality. The crows’ future is precariously poised, and the outcome of the battle with the mountain crow in the balance. And yet within a couple of lines Kenji goes from the heavenly to the humble, from arms threatening to pull the crows up into the sky and beyond, to the crows pulling on their long johns.

The moon appeared, rising up over the eastern mountains. It was already waning, and looked pressed flat and blue. It seemed to be crying. The crow fleet was quietly settling down for the night.

Suddenly a silence fell over the wood. The only noise to be heard was that of a young sailor who, losing his footing, opened his eyes in surprise and with a voice still full of sleep let fly a burst with his cannon, "Craw!"

The crow captain meanwhile was still wide awake, unable to sleep.

"Tomorrow I'll die in battle," he murmured to himself, gazing over to the wood where his fiancée was fast asleep.

In the treetops, as soft and as black as seaweed, slept the young gunboat with the beautiful voice. Her sleep was light and troubled by dreams. In one, she and the crow captain were flying all by themselves, on and on, up into the blue-black sky, swapping the occasional glance as they flapped their wings for all they were worth. The Great Bear which the crows call the Majieru<sup>24</sup> star, loomed large as it drew ever closer. Soon even the pale green apple trees that grow on the surface of one of its stars could be seen.

Suddenly finding their wings as stiff as stone, the two crows fell tumbling out of the sky, head over heels. Calling out Majieru's name, she awoke with a start to find herself falling off her branch. Quickly extending her wings, she regained her balance, and looked over towards the captain's quarters. Soon she was asleep once more.

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<sup>23</sup> Quite what is meant here is unclear. Perhaps what has been described is a dream one of the crows has dreamt (as happens later in the story where two of the dreams dreamt by the young gunboat with the beautiful voice are described).

<sup>24</sup> According to Johanna Fischer, the Majieru star gets its name from the latter part of the Latin name for the constellation, Ursa Major. 'Majieru' is the Japanese transliteration of the English pronunciation.



And again she dreamed. In her dream a mountain crow wearing a pince-nez<sup>25</sup> appeared before them. He tried to shake the captain's hand. The captain refused, pulling his hand away. Suddenly the mountain crow pulled out a shiny black pistol and with a bang shot the captain dead.<sup>26</sup> The captain fell to the ground, clutching his soft black chest.

And once more, she awoke with a start, calling out Majieru's name.

The crow captain had clearly heard everything, from the beating of her wings as she sought to right herself on the branch to the sound of her voice as she prayed, calling out Majieru's name. The captain sighed and looking up at the seven beautiful stars of the Great Bear quietly said a prayer of his own.

"I don't know if it will be me who wins tomorrow or the mountain crow. That is for you to decide. I will fight with all my strength, as is only right for me to do. Whatever happens tomorrow, it will be you who decides."<sup>27</sup>

Over in the eastern sky there was already some silvery light to be seen.

Suddenly from the far distant cold of the north came the faint sound of a voice like the jingling of some keys.<sup>28</sup> The crow captain quickly grabbed his night-vision binoculars and looked to see what it was. In the snowy-white moun-

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<sup>25</sup> The highly incongruous image of a crow wearing a pince-nez is part of the gunboat's dream sequence; it is a surreal touch that combines elements of comedy with a sinister undercurrent. The wearing of the pince-nez could be seen as an affectation (echoing the captain's earlier comment that the mountain crow is a bit arrogant).

<sup>26</sup> Earlier the crow lovers clasped hands and now the mountain crow is able to pull the trigger of a pistol. Such dexterity!

<sup>27</sup> The reason why the mountain crow has to be chased and killed is never made clear. The crow captain accepts his orders and is prepared to carry them out without ever questioning them. Yet he realizes that he may die in the fight. He regrets that he might never get to marry his fiancée. He prays to a higher being (the Great Bear constellation) and fatalistically accepts that whatever is meant to be will be. In a way, this is the story's key: it describes the experience of war of those who have to take part in it without ever knowing why.

<sup>28</sup> The jingling of keys (like the squeaking of the water wheel) is yet another example of the metallic sounds that litter this story like feedback at a heavy metal gig.

tain pass there was a chestnut tree bathed in starlight. Sitting in the treetop gazing up at the sky was the enemy, the mountain crow. The captain felt his heartbeat race.

“Craw! Emergency stations! Craw! Emergency stations!”

The captain’s men promptly pushed off from their branches, flying up into the air, circling around their leader.

“Charge!”

Leading the charge the captain headed north at top speed. The eastern sky shone white like freshly polished steel.<sup>29</sup>

The mountain crow leapt off its branch in a panic, and spreading its wings wide, sought to escape to the north. But its way was already cut off by the torpedo destroyers; they had him surrounded.

“Craw! Craw! Craw! Craw! Craw!” The noise of their cannon fire was deafening. In desperation the mountain crow flew up into the sky scrambling with its legs in a vain effort to gain extra speed.<sup>30</sup> The captain was already on him, dealing a fearsome blow to his pitch-black head. The mountain crow staggered and as he began to fall, the sergeant added a stinging blow to his side. Closing its ashen eyes, the mountain crow fell to the ground where it lay stretched out in the cold snow in the early morning light.

“Craw! Sergeant, I want you to make sure the corpse is brought back to barracks. Craw! All right, everyone, return to base!”

“Yes, sir!” As the strong sergeant lifted up the corpse, the captain began to fly back to the wood, followed by his eighteen ships. Back in their barracks, the torpedo destroyers regrouped, panting heavily, their breath white in the cold morning air.

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<sup>29</sup> Another reference to steel.

<sup>30</sup> The Japanese says 山鳥は仕方なく足をぐらぐらしながら上の方へ飛び上がりました. Here the image of an animal being chased by a pack and fleeing for its life is so vivid, we need to expand the original a little to convey the mountain crow’s panic.

“Are there any injuries? Has anyone been wounded?” The crow captain asked as he did his rounds, checking to see everyone was all right.

It was already morning. The sun's rays poured down onto the mountain snow like peach juice<sup>31</sup>, gradually flowing down into the valley below. White lily flowers burst into bloom in the snow, drenched in the sunlight.

The dazzling sun stood sadly twinkling in the sky above the snowy mountains to the east.

“Line up! Everyone on parade!” The admiral yelled.

“Line up! Everyone on parade!” The captain yelled.

The crows all stood in neat rows in the snow-covered rice field. The crow captain broke ranks, walking straight ahead with long strides over the glistening snow. He stopped in front of the admiral.

“Report to the admiral, sir! Today, at dawn, having ascertained the mooring of the enemy ship in the mountain pass at Sepira, our fleet launched an immediate attack, sinking the enemy. No casualties were suffered on our side. End of report, sir!”

The members of the destroyer fleet were so happy, they wept hot tears of joy that poured down onto the snow.

With tears welling up in his ashen eyes, the crow admiral turned to address the crow captain.

“Cree! Cree!<sup>32</sup> You have done an excellent job! Congratulations! Well done, indeed! Today you have earned yourself promotion to the rank of major. I'll leave it to you to decide which of your men deserve decoration.”

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<sup>31</sup> The peach juice is perhaps the first dash of colour in the whole story. I say ‘perhaps’ as we cannot be sure the peach juice is not in fact white peach juice! As stated above, the story is almost wholly black and white, and the white lily flowers that soon appear maintain this monochrome theme.

<sup>32</sup> The admiral has a voice weakened by overuse, so instead of the usual crow caw of ‘Craw! Craw!’ he can only manage ‘Cree! Cree!’

The newly-promoted crow major's thoughts turned to the mountain crow who had been driven down the mountain by hunger, only to find himself surrounded by nineteen hostile ships. He remembered how his enemy had died in battle, and once more he wept.

"Thank you very much, sir. With your permission, admiral, I would like to bury the enemy's dead."<sup>33</sup>

"Permission granted. Bury him with full honours."

Saluting the admiral, the major stepped back and rejoining his troops he looked up into the blue sky over towards the Majieru star.

"Blessed Majieru, please make the world such that we never again find ourselves forced to kill an enemy we cannot bring ourselves to hate. To that end I would gladly lay down my own life and have my body torn apart again and again."<sup>34</sup>

In the clear blue sky near the Majieru star a blue light welled up.

All the while, the beautiful pitch-black crow gunboat stood there motionless, shoulder to shoulder with the others, tears rolling down her cheeks. The gunboat leader pretended not to notice. From tomorrow she would again be able to rejoin her fiancée out on manoeuvres. The thought of this made her so happy, she opened her beak wide, again and again, as if to shout for joy. The sun's rays passed through her beak, lighting it up bright red.

This too the gunboat leader turned a blind eye to, as he pretended to look away.

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<sup>33</sup> According to Wikipedia (the internet encyclopedia) crows do have some form of funeral service. Did Kenji know about this when he wrote this story? An interesting thought.

<sup>34</sup> This must rank as the most typically Kenjian (Kenji-like) part of the story; the hero says he would gladly offer himself up as a sacrifice if it meant there would be no more war. He shows empathy for the fallen mountain crow, who he realizes was driven down the mountain by hunger.