

# Harbinger

Sage Ravenwood

She saw the flame flit by out of the corner of her eye  
Dancing indelicately from branch to branch  
Brilliant red a chokeberry with wings  
    Red-orange bill black masked eyes  
A bank-robbing cardinal with a punk mohawk for a crest  
She laughed If only she could hear the badass songbird  
The mewling tabby beside her shoved his head in her palm  
    Her finger accidentally rubbing against an incisor  
Not unlike last summer when the strange beasty  
    crawled under the book she read in the yard  
    laying claim to her lap and her  
She watched the crimson joy fluttering low Curious  
By the fourth day she saw him everywhere  
There wasn't a mate a tawny-brown likeness  
    with red-tinged wings rocking his world  
Always flying low within eyesight  
Perched on a tether wire  
    Hovering over the mailbox  
    Dancing a gig on a low stump in the crab-apple tree  
If he had a message from the dead  
    there was nothing left to say or haunt her  
Love and luck didn't go hand in hand either not for her  
Whatever the indigenous believed  
    Catholics corroded it by making the cardinal  
    A *hinge* to the church Not a crimson bird  
    servicing the lovelorn luck of the dead  
*This is stupid it's a beautiful albeit confused bird*  
*looking for a mate and a place to call home*  
Shaking whatever silly notions she had from her head  
    startled she swore her deaf ears  
    heard the crunch first  
Sitting down hard on the steps

*HARBINGER*

she watched in stupefied horror as her last summer  
    strange beastie landed on all fours blood dripping  
blood-red feathers floating  
    carrying the cardinal head flopping off in his mouth  
All the what-ifs settled with a thud  
    Now she'll never know if a bird was something more  
She got up to grab a shovel to bury her harbinger  
*This at least makes perfect sense*  
*Creator should have known love or any notion of luck*  
    *would haunt such a tiny body*  
For a moment she's not sure  
    If she's talking about herself or the bird

# Among the Missing

Sage Ravenwood

There's no flesh between love and pain  
Lovers hands clasped painfully tight  
Twin shadows Never one without the other  
Thin transparency between two palms  
Holding on Holding back  
    Grip crushing dying to let go  
I used to miss you before I met me  
Love was among the missing buried under want  
A wraparound porch circling a heart  
House sternum with evergreen ribbed shades  
    overlooking a lake of gastric acid  
You swallowed me whole and here I sit  
Porch nesting Birding molting scraps  
    twig braiding a nest into a spit chest plaster  
Hair breeze floating with each inhale exhale  
Lung balloons choking me out of home  
Birdcaged misogyny Mine and only mine lair  
Pecking my heart for sustenance feeding our lies  
    eggs hope laid spilling out of my nest  
Winged scapula blades filleting my shoulders  
Wish appendages sprouting downy plumate  
Pain grown with each house of you gasp  
Wings fleshing out fluttering  
    beak flounced and straightened  
I wrap claws around the porch railing caw outrage  
Fly Aerial diving a black winged coughing fit  
Feather scratched talon shredding  
    until your mouth unhinges wide  
Taking flight flown from a mouth of only yours  
Never ours yours or mine missing or met  
Between love and pain a thin membrane stretched to  
breaking open my leaving

# Wallpapered

Sage Ravenwood

Her eyes trace the outline of the Manchurian Cranes.  
A lone red patch on black heads with long olive bills;  
Lithe, snow-white necks and bodies with black-tipped wings.  
    Wings always spread wide, always in flight.  
    backdropped by gold-spun clouds over muted,  
        dark-blue, beginning-to-fade twilight skies.  
An ash-brown shawl of feathers for the females.  
Dark-brown eyes like hers always watching, staring back  
    into hers; bewitching accompaniment.  
She noticed every exquisite detail. He didn't.  
There's jagged scratch marks in places.  
Did the cat sense movement among the birds in flight,  
    a fluttering desire to be free of the wall, this place?  
Even torn beauty prevailed, unlike her plain, uninteresting.  
This was visual euphoria. How could she be wallpaper  
    with a crane's grace and mysticism? Immortality  
        trapped by paste to a wall, unnoticed eye candy.  
Her long thin fingers tease the edges, torn bits from the  
scratches,  
gentle at first, turning to frenzied clawing until blood dripped  
    anointing the crimson crowns of multiple heads.  
Still they were not free. Hurry, before he returns.  
Upend the odds-and-ends kitchen drawer,  
    crawl on hands and knees through the clutter,  
        find the wide putty knife, butcher-blade wide.  
Within minutes wings quiver among trailing  
    strips of wallpaper. *Fly, get away from here. Go now!*  
Here and there a dark-brown eye touches her cheek.  
When finished the wall sat empty of life.  
Sticky, gouged patches of nothingness.  
Now she would blend in. In quiet abandon  
    she felt something tickle softly;

*WALLPAPERED*

Did she swallow feathers attempting to free the birds?  
The rattling kar-roo crane's call beckoned.  
Spitting out pieces of wallpaper, dropping  
    the bloody putty knife from her nail-torn hand,  
a not-so-plain woman  
walked out the door to find her cranes.

# Calf Bawling Mightily

Sage Ravenwood

I was always surprised they weren't all  
hides of broken bones  
Tied up in the back of a truck cab  
Jostled like sacks of potatoes driven  
Across half a dozen fields before arriving

Each one bleating and bawling for mama  
Mama roaring and running along the fence line  
While adults whispered lies in my ears  
We're saving them from the herd  
Stronger Better this way

My ten-year-old heart beats wildly  
Along with the wobbly calf I'm trying to soothe  
our hearts blended in a cacophony of fear  
There isn't enough time to nurture either of us  
Or the roles we played in this sundering

I wasn't supposed to care There was this runt  
Mahogany fur body with a muddy tear-stained white face  
a chestnut forelock between his eyes  
Eyes pleading for mama in between bleats

My middle-finger pacifier took a bruising  
calf suckled hard And I silently  
Name him Curse him Ember  
For the flame on his forehead  
My stepdad said he wouldn't survive the night

So many nights spent stumbling down stairs  
Half asleep Ember bawling mightily

*CALF BAWLING MIGHTILY*

Not hungry Braying his loneliness to the night  
Mornings after hay stuck in my hair The little heifer  
Fascinated by breathing airborne condensation  
Between us the chilly air

He grew strong enough to douse us both  
in fake milk froth Blowing bubbles  
Headbutting the bucket and me  
Both of us calves Bucking the days

When the rain came  
He stood at the fence staring at me Fur soaking wet  
In the doorway I struggled to get waders on  
Lightning flashed and Ember's head twisted sideways  
A burnt husk hanging from his splayed body  
It's better this way I thought

The shovel head dragging behind me in the mud  
Water dripping down my face  
I buried the dead calf in a shallow grave  
He wasn't going to be thrown in the back of a truck cab  
The same way he arrived

I never named another one  
And there were so many so many  
Bawling for their mamas

# Say Love

Sage Ravenwood

Birds regurgitate food for young chicks  
    You're not a bird   don't swallow love  
Remove the ache from four letters  
Whisper mute tongue less  
Peach limb whip against will  
    Bloody dripping I don't want to  
Say love as if it's not a serrated knife in hand  
A bloody chunk of raw meat  
    force-fed to a vegetarian  
Counting seconds between each belched syllable  
Biting fingers nails to the quick   ground  
between teeth   Expectations   jaw sore   wired shut  
Strangled whimper   neck swollen   breathe  
    Say it back before you choke  
Yanked strands of hair   throat knitted  
Teeth pulling smile   toothless benevolence  
Scream quietly through a drought of tears  
Drooling emotion into a mournful lake  
All of life   can't put me  
back together again   Deaf ears  
never hear you say   Say love   I can't  
I cut the words out of my throat  
    mafia necktied my tongue  
You can have everyone else's   balm the idiocy  
Words falling easy from lips  
    having never tasted   savored the cost