

## Red-winged Blackbird

Oh, red-winged blackbird, broken in the weeds,  
keeper of the marsh's music,  
who once balanced on cattail spines  
like a note held just long enough  
to make the morning listen.

I found you where no cattails grow,  
where roadside grass chokes on dust,  
where wind carries rainbow exhaust  
rather than reedsong.

Your red epaulets,  
those miniature, burning banners  
you flared to assert your sovereignty  
over the wetlands, to warn your adversaries,  
and to call upon your companions  
were folded now, dimmed,  
faded pale against your black.

Your wing lay wrong.  
The feathers did not fold up as precisely and  
flexibly as when flying,  
but hung loosely.

I did not touch you.  
Wild things are not meant  
to be held at the end.

But still, your eye found mine,  
dark as wet earth beneath marsh water,  
bright as instinct,  
unblinking in that ancient, avian way—  
as if you measured me, not as a savior,  
but as witness to the evil my kind has laid over yours.

"I know," I said,  
though you had asked nothing.  
Because I did.

I knew the way your chest fluttered—  
too fast, too shallow.  
I imagined your nest,

softly woven among the cattails,  
swaying gently above the mirror-like surface.

I wished for the marsh at that moment.  
For water to cradle your sounds,  
for cattails to bow around your body,  
for wind to carry your name  
in *something* softer than this.

You, who knew the geometry of wind,  
how did you come to this compact, broken stillness  
at the edge of a road that does not listen?

And I wondered—was someone waiting for you?  
A companion surveying the horizon for your return,  
your red flashing brilliant as a fire signal?  
Or had the season already carried them onward,  
your flock lifting in a loose,  
restless pattern flying South across the sky?

Oh, red-winged blackbird,  
singer of boundaries and borders,  
bright-shouldered sentinel of shallow waters—  
the world did not stop for you.

But I did.

I held what little I could.  
Not your life,  
not your flight,  
but the fading warmth of a creature  
who carried the marsh in his bones,

and the echo of a call  
the reeds must learn  
to maintain without you.