Bourne toWrite... creative writing workshops

The Crow Cloak

by Juliet Robinson

Here. A hollow, gouged when the ice last rode this land. One side sheltered by the extinct volcano's flank, its steep slope biting at the sky—the other drops away; you could step out into the air and be gone. And the view—a world stretching out and away to where saltwater meets fresh in the tidal river.

This is the place.

The wind whips round, the ghost of the weekend's storm not ready to quiet its voice. The remnant snatches at the stunted trees, tossing their few remaining leaves. The near-nude branches, reminiscent of bone with flesh not fully stripped: pale, gnarled fingers scratching at the bruised sky.

A rough, barking caw, the clip of wings brushing my hair as a dark shape swerves past. She circles the hollow, wings spread wide, crying her rasping hunger. She rides the updraft and starts to orbit the hollow sunwise. The clap of her wings fills the corrie.

I watch her spinning as another crow joins the dance. And another. And another.

The air begins to warm.

A hum builds at the edge of hearing.

And away I go.

Widdershins to their sunwise.

My movement strange and stalling. Can't mirror the grace of the birds overhead. My body hasn't the elegance to match their wild sovereignty. But foot after foot, step after step, the rhyme takes hold.

Legs become lighter; my arms rise and fall. Slice the air, fingers splay, play through the wind. Skin drags tight and heavy, chest burns fierce as my heart quickens, rising to match the thrum of circling wings.

Round n' round. Ring o' ring. Meat n' feather, Heart untethers.

A cry cuts like the beak from which it was propelled. Down she spirals, lands atop a basalt throne. And my circles start to tighten, collapsing in.

She waits, ancient eyes glittering like blood, feathers a dark mantle. She cocks and bows her head, and I tilt mine in answer.

The air—how to explain the air? Could you understand it is glass about to shatter?

Time spools. Two shadows weighing the edge of what will be.

Heavy, the breath.

Dark the expectant air.

Trembling, I offer up my hand—fingertips graze her breast, warm and yielding. Her gaze holds mine, waiting for the door to open.

The glass shatters.

The air rushes back in, and she cuts her beak upon my promise.

Scalding heat—pulling, prying, cutting, rending. Iron-hard beak stabs and breaks.

The corvid cloud shrinks to a single, heavy breath dragged through the lung. Skin tears raw, pulling clear, and the flock pulses wide to the sound of my scream.

In and out: ragged breath, circling flock.

Ring o' ring, Meat n' feather, Heart untethers.

Did you know meat makes a noise when it is torn away? A wet, snapping sigh. Did you know the soul makes sound when it is opened? A whistle brighter than light. Did you know pain has a song? And its chord is becoming.

The crack of bone, the splitting of marrow. A radicle bursts forth. A green stem driving hard through cold earth. Quill from marrow, feather from blood.

Meat n' feather, Heart untethers.

Flesh retreats and wings unfurl; bones reknit and align—a hollow structure. A shudder washes down my newborn spine as human pulse burns away. Colours collapse: stark, shearing cliffs of shadow and light. The world lays its raw bones bare, picked clean by beak and claw. Soft lips fuse and stretch into a dark, curved sickle.

I throw back my head and scream. Caw out the heat from inside my chest, spit it out and drive it far.

Tumbling wild abandon. Freedom, sweeter for the brink. Into the void. Wings pull hard and swift; a sudden, wet heat rushes through every hollow quill.

The sky gives and takes—rough and yielding, biting and soothing. Its cold breath slips inside. Riding the knife-edge, I arch my spine, press it against the gale, offer up the feathered swell. The wind hitches, catches under the dark mantle; pressure mounts, hardens, pressing close and tight.

And when the last human ache dies in my throat, I step into the gale.

Where does the sky end? Where does my skin begin?

Heart untethered.

Blood slows to a quiet glide; wings spread to catch the upward draft, drifting me gently down to the cold earth. The frantic engine in hollow bones settles to a steady thrum, a quiet folding back inside the skin.

Round n' round. Ring o' ring. Meat n' feather, Heart untether.

At the centre of the corrie, upon the basalt throne, lies a cloak of oil-slick feathers dark as wet slate. I drape it over my shoulders, pulling the weight tight against my bare collarbones. The plumage settles around my neck with a soft, hushed rustle, the keen memory of wind and flight pressing my flesh.

Barefoot and lighter now, I turn my back and begin the long descent down the volcano's flank—the fury in my chest sated into stillness. I am made whole in the wild dark wrapped around my shoulders.