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Marked, and: The Hawk, and: The Hunters, and: Nest, and:
Storybook, and: Splinter, and: Mountain Child

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Marked

They are alone, the woman and the girl child.
The man has gone over the mountain

to work for a year, maybe longer, and the sunlight
here is a little bitter, the color of turmeric,

the same gold as the leaves floating down.
The girl has an eye like a spyglass for birds.

She must be marked, the woman thinks.
Wherever she walks, the shadow of a hawk

falls on her, the way a light trains on something.
In this thick forest, light can't touch

every leaf, but the woman watches
wind touch all of them. If they weren't paper-

thin, this rustling would be a hammering
like hooves on hard ground. The man will return,

but what a strange homecoming to the world
belonging to the woman and child. They cut

its intricate shapes from nothing, like silhouettes
from paper. They have a rhythm. Mornings

to the creek on horseback, ocher leaves
falling through ocher air nearly indistinguishable.

Evenings, at the fire, telling stories the man
won't know. Maybe there is something about

his hands, rough as bark, the girl will remember.
But if she's grown wild in this wilderness,

who could blame her. Once small enough
to fit inside the hawk's fallen shadow,

now she can almost outrun it, only the dark
blade of a wingtip scissoring across her face.

The Hawk

The hawk has never seen a girl child.
This new creature—smaller than a fawn,

song unlike a bird's—hushes the air
with her gold hair. The clearing seems

an invitation to light her, but the hawk
has no light to shine, only shadow.

He hovers, training his own dark double
on the girl. They are tethered, an invisible

string between them. She rarely speaks
but sings. The hawk has never seen notes

shaped like hers, each one an empty
locket with space inside it, but for what?

This is not for birds to understand.
The hawk loves the girl child best

in the open, only sunlight strumming
the tether between them, her notes

rising easily to him the way an echo
homes to the voice that calls it.

The Hunters

The hunters are just passing through.
The three men stop to rest,

to dip their ladles in the cold creek,
and there are the woman

and the girl child. The girl wears
the shadow of a hawk, feathers

like a fine-printed fabric on her skin.
The men don't know what to make

of the bird, how it hovers above her
as if held aloft by an undercurrent.

On the hillside, the lit tents glow
like lanterns. The hunters wonder

if this place is real, if they will find
their way back here and see nothing

but trees—no girl, no hawk,
no woman, no metallic cold rusting

their tongues, no spell of these woods
to be broken. But tonight the men

are warm, fed, their coarse hair cut,
their horses heaped with furs,

and the woman wears firelight
on her face, the paper lace of the dark

flickering—a reminder of the soft,
bewitching world inside the world.

Nest

For nesting, the hawk gathers the girl's
long hair—glinting, caught in a low branch,

snagged on a clothesline. Soon he'll look
for her gold curls, almost transparent

in the light, and see strands the color of bark,
dull and dark and straight. Sycamores

shed their roughest skin to reveal
the color of milk. Is the girl like this,

becoming again and again what she was
when the hawk first spied her—young,

shining like a broken bit of mirror
on the ground? The hawk doesn't know

this is a human story, the girl's story
he is only a small part of. High in a pine

is a soft, blond nest of baby hair.

Storybook

Elsewhere in this world there is water
you cannot see beyond, the hunters say,

and seabirds. The men say the ocean
is not so far from here, and the more

they say it, the more the girl smells salt
on the piney air. Elsewhere in this world

is water you cannot cross on horseback
or raft, but this place is all tinder

and leaves, all paper like a book cracked
open on its spine, and these mountains,

this intricate forest, cut from its pages.
The girl wonders if this is what the crows

have been doing with their sharp cries:
cutting leaf shapes from paper, cutting

their own shadows to throw down,
cutting the hawk's so it can follow her.

She wonders if when a baby is born
on this mountain, a caw cuts the child's

shape from flesh, too. The girl
could be elsewhere in this world, but here

she has a long, dark girl to lie down beside.

Splinter

The man returns, beard thick and rough
as splintered wood, and finds what he feared:

the woman happy, the blond baby
he left now a dark-haired girl.

He knows hunters passed through;
the girl has a fox fur the color of rust.

The woman must have been lonely.
She must have worn her hair—the color

of a copper kettle—with one loose tendril
at the nape of her neck. The firelight

must have come alive on her skin.
Now she comes in alone from the pasture

at night, raised lantern swaying. She lies
a long time with the child, whisper-singing

some lullaby he's never heard into her hair.
This side of the mountain isn't home

anymore. In the morning, as the man splits
logs for the fire, a long splinter stitches

itself into the tender meat of his palm.
He dips his hand into the cold creek

and watches the water cloud with blood,
then run clear, as if he had never been there.

Mountain Child

When the girl leaves the mountain,
she is no longer a child,

but she has not outgrown the hawk.
She wears its shadow on her shoulder,

an epaulet. It bears the weight
of allegory. When the girl leaves

the mountain, it's autumn,
so many yellow leaves on the gingko,

clusters of butterflies seem to cling
to each branch. Each time

the wind blows, a few take wing.
When the girl leaves, the mountain

flickers with shadows. What else
can left-behind birds offer

but their own shapes cut
from the papery dark. They call, *Please,*

girl child, mountain child. The ground
beneath her feet is a trick

of gold wings—at any moment a few
might flutter, then rise all at once.