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Fledglings

by Mari Syrad

I touched her maple skin and remembered the softness of blue May sky brushed with muslin cloud. As if it wasn't skin but air. As if she was still the light. As if I hadn't stolen the final, perishing pieces of her.

But that was after. This is before.

I stole her heart away and put ice in its place. Ice the shape of a bird, a fledgling on the verge of virgin flight. As if the world was not a monster with peppermint teeth. As if its breath didn't rumble up mustard gas green at the sight of its prey.

We were all fledglings once.

Unprepared, fledglings launch with their soft skeletons barely covered by youthful eiderdown, into the relentless, chomping jaws of the world. As if no one warned them. No one warned them.

Some of them evolve, sprouting steel armour where wings should have been, as if they were preparing for war. Others don't survive the fall.

This reality goes unwritten. And when questioned why the truth cannot be recorded, for the babies, not even for the babies, it is as if the questioner is mad and the liar not a liar but a lord. And all look to him as the truth teller instead of the peddler of untruths that he is: a wolf who sells cockerels at the fair dressed up as plump and comforting hens.

I could never get an answer no matter who I asked, all being afraid and complicit in the way it all works. No courage or care among them. As if no one was bothered but me. My confusion and dismissal led to rage. I no longer recognised myself in the mirror, my feathers turned to charred leather over time.

So I made dark the only light there was, to somehow rid myself of the rage, as if the night could be brightened by the day in a world of perpetual night. Instead, I burned out each flame she lit for herself until she saw things through my bitter eyes and the last was snuffed out.

At the end, she couldn't bear to tell the truth of herself to anyone, the truth that I had taught her, that she was nothing just like the rest of us. As if their hearing it would cancel out all the goodness in the world.

She wandered lost into the haze never knowing that she was all the kindness and all the goodness there had ever been.

And thinking about it now, long after it's too late, with love like hers, you could say it was as if the world had not really been so bad, as if it was not hopeless after all. As if it wasn't all too late.