A Giant Bird

Kevin Prufer

Its great heart pounded like the distant sea
wounding itself against the cliffs.

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We lived in its shade.

Sometimes, my daughter ran her fingers along that part of the breast
that swagged low over our camp.

It’s beautiful, she said, smoothing a feather’s twig-like barbs,
gazing past our mountain toward the burning cities.

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What kind of bird is it?

Some feathers were tawny, others tinged a perfect white.

Is it a sparrow?

It may be a sparrow.

Is it an owl?

I can’t see its face.

An eagle? I think it’s an eagle.

We often played this game.

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The breezes made trails of the smoke
that rose from the distant burning cities.

Those people worshipped golden eagles.
We saw the statues winking on their plazas in the sunset.
Sometimes, it would soar beyond the mountains to the sea, its black shadow slipping over the valleys.

But always it returned by evening, settling gently over us again.

I knew it was an eagle from the talons curling beneath its down, and the set of its enormous wings.

I’d become accustomed to the fingers of smoke that rose on windless summer days.

What are they doing?  
They’re killing each other.  

Why are they killing each other?  
The bird shifted on blood-stained talons, resettled itself.  
Why are they killing each other?  
Their golden eagles glistened in the sun.

Sometimes, one city had acquired all the golden eagles. Sometimes another city had them, or a third. Sometimes, the golden eagles were distributed evenly among them all.

Those days, we did not worry about the rain, nor the heat of the sun, except when the bird rose from our cliffs and vanished in the direction of the sea where, we knew, it ate.
Later,
we learned it fed on men who fished in boats along the shore.
Later,
it ate captured soldiers
chained to highly decorated rafts and set adrift.

You will have predicted by now
that one day the bird did not return.

All month, the cities in the valley had been quiet,
as if they’d forged a peace.

The weather, too, was sultry and unshifting.

Then up from the distant cliffs that tumbled toward the sea,
a lighter plume of smoke arose,

and when the sea winds turned, we smelled upon them burning flesh.

After they’d devoured it—

after they’d stripped the meat from its bones,
after they’d fed cubes of its heart to their dogs,
after they’d hung its talons from the doorways
of their holy places—

they built from its bones a scaffolding,
then fastened to it feathers made of worn-out sails.

Its beak they built from the bound-together hulls
of two wrecked ships.
These days,
   there’s peace in the newly gentle cities,
and freedom I had not expected.

The valley is cool when the winds rise up from the sea.

Sometimes I walk the long path from my house near the east gate,
down the ravine and up the other side,

where I come across what remains of our home.
It towers over me, its canvas ragged and whipping in the breeze,

its lashed-together bones grown white and creaking.

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You people with your fancies and distractions
don’t remember how it brooded over this valley,

how lovely it must have been, talons outstretched,
diving seawards in your afternoons.