Fold your hands in your lap, Mother hisses. Look pleasant. Don’t say anything, and for God’s sake keep your eyes down.

The Lord Nicholas Hunsdon, the servant by the door announces. My skirt rustles as I stand to curtsy. Mother stays seated, her back straight and haughty. She nods to him like it hurts.

Lord Hunsdon, Father greets him. The words sound hard, clenched.

Hunsdon murmurs a reply. His voice seems amused, or perhaps ironic. He knows that my father dislikes him, and he knows he is the only one who will consider taking me. I notice that he has a pleasant voice, a cello’s voice, and I twist my fingers in my lap.

This is your daughter? he asks, moving closer. I cannot see his face, so I look at his feet instead—they are well shod in a pair of fine, dark riding boots. When he halts a few paces away from the couch that Mother and I are sitting on, he shifts his weight back, onto his right heel. What I can see of his clothing is well-tailored, rich, fashionable.

I had heard that she is beautiful, Hunsdon says. He pauses for a heartbeat, and then adds, I have also heard a most disturbing rumor.

Mother’s fingers tense, barely, as Father clears his throat. Father says, Surely you have not paid heed to gossips’ tales? I am a powerful man, after all; I have enemies.

Of course, Hunsdon replies, his polite tone colored with the slightest shade of doubt. I wonder if he is smiling, because of course he knows the truth; everyone knows the truth.
Stand up, girl, he commands me suddenly. Turn around. I obey, hands clenched white-knuckled in the folds of my skirt. When I have come full circle, I look into his face. His eyes remind me of the dragon’s eyes I saw in a painting once, intelligent, emotionless.

He does not take them from my face as he half-turns to Father and says, I’ll take her.

—

Father fixes me with a hard stare and says, You will marry him, or I will cast you out in the streets.
Yes, sir, I say with lowered eyes.
God forgive you for what you’ve done, Mother says, her eyes as cold as marble, before she turns her back and leaves the room.
And that is that.

—

There is an attic upstairs, he informs me the morning after our wedding. I glance up at him from my needlework, but I have not yet learned to read his expression, his hooded eyes. He says, I’ve ordered the servants to tidy it. You may use it, if you’d like.
He walks away before I can respond, so I go upstairs alone. I open three doors before I find the right one, because I do not want to ask the head servant, Margaret, for help.
The attic is small and spare, with rough wooden floors the color of wheat. There is no furniture, just a stack of threadbare pillows pushed to one side and a ladder in the corner leading up to a door in the ceiling. Sunlight streams into the room through a single, tiny window.
I press my forehead to the cool doorframe and wait until my eyes and my throat stop burning. Then I set about searching for a chair, and my trunk full of books, the only thing of value I own in this place.
One day, when the sky is summer-warm and the silver leaves of the white willow tree beside the house just barely rustle at the wind, I climb up the ladder and out to the roof.

The air smells like lavender and the sun feels as warm as your hands against my breasts. Three crows watch me with eyes like those of the vendor from Arabia on the street corner—foreign and piercing, wary. I won’t harm you, I say. I just want the sky too.

It is peaceful here, with the city stretching out below me. The scent of chicken bones and blood and a dash of spices—like flame, like fullness, like the orange fruit you once pressed to my lips and said, Eat—drift on the wind. Merchants’ shouts, horses’ clanging footfalls, women’s chatter reach me, but they cannot touch me here.

Where are you now? Gazing out over a city like I am? Playing your guitar with your elegant poet’s hands, as your brothers accompany you on trumpet, violin, and Alonso sings in his brass-bright voice? Dancing with the dark-eyed woman with her skin like olives and her name you’d never tell me? Am I there, too, in those thoughts that used to roil across your face like thunderstorms?

I am not sure how much time passes while I sit here, suspended between sunlight and sky, but it is enough; the door beside me bursts open and Margaret’s eyes peer out at me, suspicious and curious. The crows croak their rough-throated disapproval as they flap away ungracefully. A few feathers settle onto the roof in their wake and I reach out to touch an edge with one finger.

What are you doing? Margaret says. Come inside before the neighbors see you, skirts about your knees and petticoats flapping like sails.

I don’t respond, but I do as she instructs. Later that day, when she is called to the kitchen to help prepare supper, though, I climb back up and collect the feathers. I hide them in a corner in the attic, behind the pile of dusty pillows.
You told me that you loved my hair, the color of honey, of sunlight. Of the wood of your pale guitar. Bella, you murmured, when you touched it. Beautiful.

Mi bella con pelo de oro. Mi querida.

You breathed the words like a prayer as you bent to lay a trail of silk-soft kisses across my collarbone.

Te amo. Te amo.

Sometimes I study my reflection, trying to see what you saw. Te quiero, mi amor. My hair is not pretty, not ugly. Just hair.

—

The crows are not always on the roof when I climb the ladder, but their feathers are. It becomes a ritual for me, to gather the feathers up, carry them inside, tuck them behind the pillows. I am not certain why, or what I will do with them when there are too many to hide, but they are mine and that is all that matters.

Every so often I take them out and turn them over and over in my hands, admiring. They are surprisingly glossy, the smooth glassy black of the polished rock a trader once displayed; he said it came from a volcano, a mountain spewing smoke and ash and fire like a dragon. In different slants of light, they become purple-blue-green, like a sunset, or a bruise, or the peacock’s tail that the king keeps in his gardens.

—

There is a mirror on the wall beside the bed. I watch him move over me, jerking and shuddering, clumsy hands grasping at my stomach, my ribs, my breasts. That way I can pretend, almost, that it is happening to someone else—that it isn’t me, that woman staring back at me with her dark eyes like smears.

I refuse to dishonor you, my memories, your name by pretending that he is you. There could be no mistaking anyway, even if I tried. I wonder what you would think of me now.
Sometimes I watch, through the parlor window, as ladies pass me on their way to tea or balls or parties. They wear sweetheart-pink dresses that float in their wakes like clouds. They are my age, sometimes a little older, sometimes a little younger. Sometimes I think I recognize a face, a necklace, someone’s hair. They laugh. I remember going out like they did, carefree, careless.

Do you remember? Do you remember that golden afternoon, strumming the tender chords that would drift down the street and turn my head? The way you looked at me when I came to watch you and your brothers play, like I was cream, like I was wine. _Te quiero, mi amor._ I thought I was drowning when you looked at me like that.

You couldn’t have realized what it meant for me, when you left. You always laughed and shook your head when I said I was afraid. Even when I told you that my maid knew, even when she was going to tell my parents. You said you would take me with you, but you just touched my neck and kissed my mouth and left.

And now I live like this.

_God forgive you for what you’ve done._

—

Today he brings back a book. For you, he says as he presses it into my hands.

I turn it over, running my fingers over the rough cloth binding. There is a gold-leaf eagle imprinted upon the front cover, and I think of the pile of crows’ feathers accumulating in the corner of the attic. The book has a wonderful heft, and I resist the urge to open it, to bury my nose in the midst of the pages that will smell like ink and foreign spices.

Thank you, I say, and put it onto a table.

His dragon’s eyes follow the movement. I thought you liked to read, he says.

I used to, I answer. I turn away, think for a moment. The stories make me sad, I say, but when I turn back he is gone, and I am speaking to air.
A woman lives in the alley by the church. I see her every day I walk to market.

Are you happy? I ask her this morning.

She stares at me. What do you mean? she says, eyes wide and suspicious. Do you have any money?

I draw out my purse, pour its meager contents into her expectant palm. She backs away from me, hiding the coins among her clothing with deft fingers, her smile thin and yellowed.

Wait, I say, but she doesn’t stop.

She reaches the corner and starts running. The next time I pass the church, she isn’t there.

—

There is a lone guitar playing on the corner of the street. The song is sad and deep, and soughs like the ocean. A swell and ebb of chords. Silence, then a string of solitary reluctant notes, dropping into the still air like pearls.

I stand in the doorway and listen until the guitar has long since gone quiet and all that is left is the sound of my breathing. The streets are empty today.

—

One afternoon I lay down to take a nap. When I wake up he is there beside me, seated on the edge of the bed. He watches me with his hollow dragon’s eyes.

My lord, I murmur, disoriented. My apologies. When I try to get up, he places one burning palm on my shoulder.

You’re lucky, you know, he says. His beautiful voice is soft, a cello’s pianissimo. I don’t know how to respond, so I don’t say anything. He leans down, putting his face next to mine. His breath is hot on my cheek. He smells like wine and sweat, and it makes me uneasy, but I keep myself still, calm.

I was the only one who would take you, he says. He eases his body onto the bed, pressing close to me. Can he feel my heart against my ribs, thrumming as swift and hard as your women’s feet against the cobbles when they dance? He props himself up on one
strong arm; with the other hand, he runs a gentle finger across my cheek, my jaw, my lips. I don’t try to move, just look up, past him. Concentrate on the ceiling.

You should be grateful, he says. The ceiling is the color of a mourning dove’s breast, or the warm oval of a hen’s egg, or the lacy froth at the tip of a wave, a white with too many subtleties to be called white, and I cannot imagine how I never noticed how lovely it is before, since I’ve spent so much time here in this room, on this bed, searching for something, anything to focus on.

Are you grateful? he says. He caresses my neck, tender, and then his fingers shift, encircle the smooth skin of my throat. He lets them rest there, as light as a gold necklace.

Look at me. His command is harsh and flat, like an overstrained string has snapped in the cello of his voice.

No, I say, a candlelight whisper, a moth’s wings whisper. I have just enough time to wonder at myself, and then he is on top of me, and I can’t breathe or move or think as he rips at my skirts, his breeches, my undergarments and thrusts into me so hard that the room warps with pain and I can’t tell if I’m screaming or crying and I want to die—I want to die and he pumps, fast and relentless, until the bones in my wrists start to ache where he’s pinned them with his lean hands and finally, finally he gives way and subsides. He lays limp and heavy for a moment, his ragged breath deafening in my ear. At last he stands up, arranges his creased clothing, stares down at me.

Whore, he spits, and leaves.

That night I go up to my attic and push my trunk of books in front of the door and refuse to come out, even when one of the maids tries to get in to clean, or when Margaret climbs the stairs to fetch me for supper, or when the mild rays of sun stretch longer and thinner and paler like the delicate strands in a spider’s web until at last they vanish. For a while I sit on the floor, letting the hot tears dry, salty and stiff, on my cheeks.

My mouth tastes sour and I can see the first dark petals of bruises blooming on my wrists, so I take all of my feathers from
the corner and spread them before me like a tapestry, and that makes me feel better. I think about climbing up to the roof, but my legs feel like wood and suddenly I can’t keep my eyes open. I let my body settle into the sleek pile of feathers and sleep.

I dream about crows: the soft snap of feathers as they flap upward into skies the color of moonstones, their ragged calls echoing back and forth as they spiral and spiral against the wind. I extend my arms, pale and untouched in the dream, and cry, Wait, wait, I can’t stay here, I can’t stay, but they only fly higher and higher and then they are gone.

I wake up cold and aching, my cheek pressed hard to the rough floor, but I know—I know the way to escape.

When I go downstairs for breakfast the next morning, he is sitting in the lonely parlor, penning a letter in his pointed handwriting, as though a stalk of spiny briars had been pressed onto the page.

I don’t want to stop, I want to keep going, my measured steps graceful and composed. But I catch a glimpse of his straight back, his wiry shoulders, and my stomach clenches, icy, like I’ve swallowed a mouthful of cold starlight. My feet slow until I am standing in the open doorway, watching him.

He turns to gaze at me when my footsteps halt, and I wonder what he sees in my face. With a very deliberate motion, he places his elegant quill into the inkwell. Then he says, Good morning.

I clench my shaking fingers in my skirts and stare at him, steady and focused, until he clears his throat and looks away.

From that point on, I don’t look at him again.

It takes me two weeks to assemble the materials I need: as many candles as I can steal from the candelabras and sconces around the house, for wax; a fat ball of cooking string from the pantry; a linen sheet from the laundry drying outside; and three slim, stout sticks of what the carpenter called bamboo that I traded for my necklace with its string of glossy pearls like tears.
I find a bright-edged knife in the empty kitchen one night and bring it up to my attic, and then I am ready to begin.

—

In the mornings I go up to the roof, study the crows, the way that they fly, the way that they lean into the wind so that they stay suspended, hovering in one spot, for long breathtaking moments. In the afternoons and evenings, I build. I go downstairs for meals and I make sure that no one catches me on the roof.

Late every night I return to his bed, because I have to.

He is rougher than he was before, and sometimes he doesn’t bother undressing me. Usually he is silent and brooding, but sometimes he rages and on those nights I get fresh bruises and the servants watch me with pity in their eyes the next morning when they think I don’t see them. But I just lie still and wait for him to stop and think of my idea taking shape in the attic. Then we both go to sleep and when I wake up in the mornings he is gone.

—

You used to tell me about your beloved Spain, your stories flecked with those beautiful words that sound like blossoming carnations and taste like spiced wine.

Los olivos, with their spindly branches spiraling into the sky like witches’ fingers, which dot the rocky hillsides along every arid road. Women wearing heavy dresses in the shape of the lofty campanas that peal, sweet and strong, in the towers of the decorated cathedrals. An ocean as still and bright as glass beside the pale sun-warmed beaches, where the pescadores drag their crude boats down into the water at dawn and sail out until they look like inkblots on the white horizon.

Spain. That is where I will go when everything is ready. To taste your Spain.
The night that I finish building, almost a month after that first time, he puts his long fingers around my neck and squeezes. I open my mouth but the sound is trapped in my throat, caught between his unrelenting fingers, so I push at him with weak hands until his thin mouth twists into a grimace and he finally lets go.

He watches me like he is watching a dying bird as I cough and cough, the raw air scraping my throat each time I breathe in. He smells like the tavern and his dragon’s eyes are glassy with too much ale.

He does not try to touch me again. For a moment he looks like he might speak, but then he doesn’t, just turns over and snuffs out the candle and goes to sleep. I lie awake in the cool darkness for a long time, waiting for my frantic heart to stop pounding, waiting for his breathing to slow into the level rhythm of slumber.

*I can’t stay here, I can’t stay.*

*God forgive you for what you’ve done.*

*There is an attic upstairs. You may use it, if you’d like.*

When I am certain that he is asleep, I slip from the bed and move to the wardrobe on silent, solemn footsteps, pulling out my plainest satin dress and the small cloth sack of bread, figs, cheese, and almonds that I packed last night. After a moment’s thought, I also find his coat, search out the purse with its gold coins clinking like chimes deep within his pocket. Then I leave, closing the thick door behind me.

*This is your daughter? I had heard that she is beautiful. I have also heard a most disturbing rumor.*

*Bella. Mi bella con pelo de oro. Te amo, mi amor, te quiero.*

Up in the attic, the wings await, spread out in the middle of the pale floor like two great swells of nighttime sea. In the frail circle of light that my candle sheds, they are beautiful, as lustrous as a peacock’s feathers, shimmering purple, then blue, then green, then black.

*I’ll take her.*

I dress quickly in the chill air, my fingers hurried and trembling, and then tuck the purse of gold and the sack of food into my dress. Assured that they will not slide out, I put my candle aside,
gather up the wings, my wings, with gentle hands, and climb the ladder up to the roof.

What are you doing? Come inside before the neighbors see you.

There is a stiff, clear wind blowing tonight, and I can smell the sharp brine of the sea in it. When I stand up, it tugs at my skirt, ruffles the dark feathers of the wings, slides along the exposed skin of my throat. I shiver, in anticipation, as I tie my wings to my arms.

Are you happy?
You will marry him, or I will cast you out in the streets.
I just want the sky.

The roof is slick with dew and the sea spray on the wind, and my foot slips as I approach the end of the roof, but I don’t fall. When I reach it, I pause for a moment, close my eyes, lean into the crisp edge of wind. It has been a long, long time since I have felt so clean, so complete.

You’re lucky, you know.
God forgive you.
I thought you liked to read.
Do you have any money?
The stories make me sad.
You should be grateful. Are you grateful?
Te amo, mi querida.
Look at me.

Eyes still closed, I stretch my arms wide and take the last step off of the roof, into the dark and swirling night.

No.