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Desert Phoenix

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Desert Phoenix

Janet Lynn Garrard

T
ami,

It's raining outside. Sheets of wet wash the summer dust into the gutter and sweep the first autumn leaves underneath my car in a good, Northwestern-style downpour. I imagine you might have a similar view from your dorm window, although I never made it as far north as Bellingham. We may not have the ocean and the rainforests or western Washington, but at the moment we certainly have the rain. Rain! Thunder and lightening! All of God's fury thrown into fireballs and flooding street corners! Do you remember how, when we were little, I used to tell you that thunder was the Second Coming, and you'd go screaming toward the fence, flailing your four-year-old arms to fend off the earthquakes? Not that the Second Coming ever comes with such dramatic warning, and not that it comes only once. Christ appeared to me today in the form of a needle plunged unceremoniously into my wrist; I am at-one-ment with an I.V. drip.

I've put off writing you since I was in the MTC, since my hair started falling out in strands and draping the shower drains like wet orange lace. I don't believe in dramatic farewell letters, because I don't consider this a farewell and because death is not dramatic. I used to think it was. I even considered it romantic, when they first shipped me in church vehicles to the MRI center and the elders gave me stilted blessings from the white bible of mission conduct. Then I went through the bitter stage (heaven knows you heard about that!) because, dammit, I'm an honor student—I was supposed to run an orphanage in Africa and convert the Pope, and I haven't finished my quilt yet. Bitterness and romance seem sophomoric now; both make assumptions of drama in a circumstance that lacks the unnatural.

You probably don't remember this, but when I was twelve and you were eight, our family drove across northern Montana on the way to Gram's ranch. We stayed one night at an obscure campground and set up the yellow Jan-Sport dome in the dark. I unzipped the tent flap the next morning, stood up, rubbed the

dirt off my face, and reeled. I think that was the first time I ever saw a desert. The ground cut into my feet, and the dust left an orange stain on everything it touched. I gashed my toe on a rock and hobbled around the sagebrush, leaving a bloody path of curiosity.

The campground had a little shack for an outhouse. The boards were bleached and cracked from exposure; brown-haired spiders crawled through the walls above the toilet and the sand blew in. The outhouse's tin roof scalloped around the edges, leaving space between the angle where wall meets ceiling. Each space bulged with brush and dirt; each bulge made a terrible noise—raspy, uncivilized, pathetic. The baby birds inside the nests didn't know song yet, but they knew hunger and announced it to the desert without hesitation.

I could see a few beaks sticking into the air, a few yellow points of denial. Where were the mother birds? Were all the nests there so I had to step in guano and smell the warm stink of feathers just to use the john? I stepped on something cold and looked down at the crumpled body of a baby bird at my feet. And then another, and another—a graveyard of winged infants, topsoil up. I guess they had tried to fly, tried to leap from underneath the bent tin that clamped over them like a fist, tried to stretch inside the red horizon and follow their mother into sky.

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Besides, the sun on that tin roof must have converted the nests into ovens; maybe they had just flung themselves over the edge in an attempt to escape the hellish heat. For whatever reason, the birds lay rotting around the baseboards of a forest-service outhouse. Their siblings screeched above them; I saw one fall and made no attempt to replace it. I was no savior, no bird. Just a dirty kid with a full bladder and blood on my feet.

We drove away, before the sun could climb high enough to scorch the sand. I've thought about that day a few times since, but never with disgust, or distaste, or anything less than wonder. Disney perpetuates a lot of lies—the natural world is neither merciful nor cute. The natural world is filled with the bloody carcasses of the arbitrary: if the bunny gets away then the owl dies, but if the owl lives . . .

Annie Dillard writes that a tenth of the world's organisms are parasitic; I wonder what tithe I pay. *Lupus Erythematosus*/nl: a *systemis disease of unknown cause and unpredictable course*. . . . "Your body turns against itself, systems feeding on other systems," says the kind doctor, her table holding both aspirin and a scalpel. They named it "Lupus" because the scarlet flush on patients' faces resembles the marking of a wolf—wolves, symbols of ferocity and

grace. And you know, I find no peace in Disney flicks, no peace in pastel sympathy cards or pulpit clichés. I find my peace in the wilderness. Wilderness. Wild. Without civility. Savage.

But, of course, Christ is the benevolent figure washing the feet of His apostles with tears, but He is also the waves of returning water at the Red Sea, the gaping chasms of earth that devoured whole cities, the blood on Elijah's alter, the flames that licked sacrificial cows. He blew life into hyena and dove, equally sacred. We remember resurrection morning often enough—why do we forget the suffocating dark at the cross? It is the marriage of the two that brings salvation. Fall to be redeemed. Die to live. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Pass through sorrow, and you might know joy.

So I am—or might become, anyway—one of the birds that fell. You are—and I hope will remain—one of the birds left in the nest, screaming from hunger. You will go on screaming, after I fall, after I cease from screaming, after my body has rotted and crumbled into the dust. And although I value our individuality, I have to say that we are alike—just like the birds. You are my sister. You write poetry. You listen to Joan Baez. You kick at men who try to hurt you and at men who try to love you. You don't eat meat. You like sad movies and hot food. You laugh deep, from the gut. You argue with closed fists, and you dance with palms held open. You are my sister, and you will keep on screaming. If you didn't, if the birds in the nest stopped their hungry cries out of some warped respect for the fallen, the wilderness would fail.

You are mad at me. I'd be mad at you, if you wrote me a letter like this. I'm not going to rage against the desert's dying light. I'll leave you to do that. You know what I know, all of the strength that comes from separating culture from gospel—from authenticity. You never fell for Walt's surfaces, for the EFY sing-alongs or the two-and-a-half-minute talks. It is the marriage of peace and cruelty that makes this world, Tami, like the angel that guards Eden and the Tree of Life; he wields a sword. Don't settle for one of them—don't take pacification *or* rage as adequate weapons for redemption. God is good, and the good encompasses both sides of the fruit—one half concupiscent fall, one half eternal life. Spin it in your palm; you have to eat it entirely. Whole.

I can feel pain in my wrist from the needles, pain in my head. I can also feel the sweet pain of my heart, the pain that yearns for earth, for flight—the pain of

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scar tissue that comes from repentance. And I feel so at peace. The rain outside washes the leaves from underneath my tires, washes the dust into the gutters, washes the gullies of the desert, washes the doubt in my soul. God sends the rain; God sees each bird drop, then fly. Other than that, please know that I'll see that you get rain when you need it, and plenty of furious lightening. It's the Second Coming, you know.

Love, Janet Lynn



Janet Lynn Garrard is a junior majoring in English literature. She likes opera and back-packing. She deplores shoes, and she is happy to report that after multiple tests for Lupus, her physicians determined that she has a different, non-life-threatening disease.