

Brief Studies of Doomed Females

by Jacquelyn Bengfort

I. Sometimes, You Are A Bird.

Sometimes you are a bird.

Sometimes you sing sweetly in morning like a songbird should. You build a nest. You bring joy to those around you. But if the weather turns cold, you turn south and you fly away.

They call for you. You do not come back. They hope you found a nice nest; they try not to hold it against you. Always thought you might leave, hoped you wouldn't. They pray against the prevalence of cats and car grills and bad ends. Love is kind, etc.

Sometimes you are a phoenix.

You blaze, and it is hard to look at you. Your song turns molten, and oh it flows. Their eyes reflect with gold, with greed. Once they see they cannot unsee.

At the end of the song the ashes cover you and they hold their breath. It's the blow-off, the big moment. The hush, and then you arise, new-born, stripped clean, brought forth on a tide of lust and clapping hands.

Most often you are a bird on fire.

But they never seem to realize until it is too late that you weren't a phoenix after all.

The ashes—only ashes.

The hush lasts and lasts and breaks with a murmur of concerned wonderment.

And the lights come up and the police take notes with shaking heads, and everyone stands facing different directions and looking at their hands until it is over and the janitor sweeps you out the back door.

But sometimes,
sometimes,

(sometimes) you are a bird.

II. The Queen's Child

She closes the book, places it on the table, and finally, decides to walk through the door.

She prepares herself, taking up the vast cloth she's sewn of old frocks when the light was too little to read. She is unsure if it will work, despite all her reading of physics and flying carpets and propeller planes. The practicalities of aerodynamics in application remain to be tested.

In the end it has taken less than a decade to read all the books in the mountain fortress, working at the stacks by day just as the little man had worked at immense piles of straw by night. How different things had been when she started, she thinks. Her mother still alive, her father alive and wealthy. How ten years, not even that, changes things.

Now it is I whose name is known by none.

Her dear, slow, beautiful mother, dead as the son she had died trying to birth. Her avaricious, grief-tortured father, lying bleached-boned with his treasure three miles below. It had been his fault, bringing so much weight of riches so high up a mountain. When the earth itself shuddered on the anniversary of her mother's leaving, the walls of their castle, the counterfort floors, all of it had slid away, taking her father and the servants. Leaving only the child and the central room of books.

Lucky for her that even in that first year she'd taken to living in the library. Her father, busy counting and recounting his bobbins of spun gold and forgetting his wife, had ordered her lunches and all her things brought into that room. Lucky too that she had once had so many dresses. Lucky she had learned to sew before she'd begun to read.

She grew gaunt and wise on raindrops and snow and words. Sometimes she caught a high-flying bird and ate it, blood mixing with the inks on the creamy pages.

But the time for reading is over now. Every book is read. She ties the corners of fabric together, forming one loop for each arm. She takes nothing with her but what she has fit into her head. The descent is so steep that she long ago realized the only way down was to fall to the base of the mountain.

She opens the door, blinking in the cold coming off the snow at her slippered feet. She steps onto the ledge as behind her, the great patchwork cloth fills with air and tugs at her shoulders.

She takes one step forward. Two.

III. Fire Season

He was imprisoned for the most common violations, an appetite for cocaine and purple nutsedge, leaving her to raise us on fears culled from the morning paper.

“Summer could be at risk,” she warned, but we laughed and called it fire season, browsed the chainsaws on the sidewalk.

She warned too of a significant swath of humanity kept ticking by pigs' heart. “Life year-round and certain death,” said we, talented kids in an insufficient culture.

She received a long letter from prison sent by an august and sober man. He dreamed, he wrote, of turf that links the inland to the ocean, where they two would find the longest feathers of any dinosaur.

He wrote to say he was coming back home soon, by the Sunday deadline, and so she found a set of towers, as women and men sometimes do. The normal theater, staged attractively. Juliet, Ophelia, Cleopatra. She was not without precedent.

We spent the rest of our lives explosively hoisting our guilt to light like a standard diamond.

