

THE CATALYST

CONTEMPORARY LITERARY ARTS MAGAZINE



ISSUE 9 // FALL 2016

TOBY

FIRE, FIRE

BY RICKY BARAJAS

PHOTO // JACK BETZ

There's a phoenix in my dreams every night.
With every flap of its wings, the phoenix reminds me
There's a fire under my feet.
I should move if I don't want to be burned.



I climb into bed and pull my blanket over my body. The sheets are cold against my skin, but they're so soft. I wiggle a little bit and nestle down, wrestle my toe into the elastic band of my sock, and pull it off. Repeat. I can feel my eyelids grow heavier as the temperature evens out in the cocoon I've created for myself. Being surrounded by the blankets strengthens the scent of my laundry detergent. "This is nice," I think to myself. "This is nice." I deepen my breaths, and realize that they are coming farther, and farther in between, and as my eyes close one last time, I wake up.

I'm not in bed anymore... I'm not in my house anymore. My surrounding is familiar, but nothing seems right. The light is... different. Almost as if I'm sitting on the floor of the ocean and looking up. It looks like everything I've ever seen and nowhere I've ever been. Massive sand dunes expand out into the horizon. Small wisps of sand snake and slither atop the sharp desert gales. A ring of redwoods and Joshua trees surround me, and the clouds roll and turn in the sky. I walk through tall grasses and their whispers float on the breeze.

A resounding cry rattles the world. I do not know what it came from, or where it came from, but I recognize it as truth. Another cry rings out— the most pure and clear note I've ever heard, and I feel the reverberation in every inch of my body. It disrupts my heart at first and then harmonizes with it, filling my body with a heavenly symphony. And that's when I see it. In the sky, a massive bird flies with the sun in its talons and fire of every color trailing in its wake.

The fire surrounds me— iridescent, powerful, inspiring, but does not cause me pain. I see figures in the flames. Presences, both foreign and familiar reach out to my soul, and illuminate the parts of me that I know, the parts that I will know, the parts that I have forgotten. A voice sounds in my mind, but it is not the rapid motormouth of my thoughts. "Stay true." I do not comprehend the full meaning of this, but I am moved to tears, falling to my knees.

Images flood my mind. I see confusion, apathy, hatred. An angry mob of voices sounds and the earth opens and begins to weep, its molten tears traveling down from the mountain and shaping new paths. Fires ravage the land. Smoke burns my nostrils, my throat, and my lungs; ashes waft lazily in the air.

A rapid "p-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t" sounds in my ear. A movie reel projector? Memories, mine, this time, begin to loop. I see joy, laughter, love. All around me is ash and sand. The bird flaps its wings again and suddenly is upon me. Arcs of electricity spring off of the flames that surround me. Their heat grows more intense; it becomes unbearable. The bird looks me in my eye. Its gaze pierces my soul. I feel the weight of every moment of doubt, inadequacy, fear, and self-hatred I've ever felt. This burden is so hard to carry... I just... want to set it down. Tears cut trails down my cheeks, cartographing the landscape of my face. These disappear shortly after

from the intensity of the heat. I accept my fate. I am lost to the blaze.

Warm rain falls. The scent of the storm and the coolness of the droplets on my skin soothe my spirit and I do not hurt anymore. My clothes are tattered; the water glues them to my body. My hair is flattened and the feel of the mud on my feet exhilarates me, sending shivers up each of my limbs. I lift my hands towards the sky and think to myself, "God is in the rain."

A tiny bud wins the fight against the shell of its seed. It breaks out of the earth, leaves unfurling: a proud declaration of existence. In the distance, beyond the rain, a flickering light dances; the shadows leap and jive and become one with the darkness. In seeing this, all of this, I'm struck with a sudden realization. Nothing created lasts forever. Nothing destroyed is gone. More seedlings begin to sprout; a young forest forms. The flickering light grows weaker, more shadows escape, laughing into the night.

I venture towards the light, but it's growing weaker. I have to find it. I have to know what it is. The forest is so dense now, my feet get tangled in the undergrowth and I fall. Hard. The air whooshes out of my lungs, and I feel them flatten in my chest. The light is still fading but I need to find it before it's gone. I claw my fingers into the muck and slowly but determinedly, drag myself along the forest floor.

I chase after it for a while, but it flies faster than I could ever run. There's a mountain before me, the forest behind me. Do I return to what I know? Or do I follow my heart? Desperate, mad even, for one last glimpse, I start for the mountain. My limbs are heavy with doubt, and my breathing is haggard from the intensity of this entire experience. My fingers have been rubbed raw by the stone and my nails have been gone since the forest. My arms and legs burn and with my heart to let them rest, but I can't. I'm so close to the top. One, gasp. Last, gasp. Push, gasp. One, gasp. Last, gasp. Pull. I drag myself up and lie on my back trying to regain my composure. A few moments pass and I feel well enough to sit up. I am on top of the world, and nothing is hidden from me here.

I finally find the source of the light. A giant skeleton sits in a crater. The sky's so dark, without even the distant glimmer of starlight. I gingerly step into the crater and pebbles roll down into the center. The rain is still falling. In the heart of the skeleton, there's an egg and the light pulsates out of it. I make my way towards it and look up at the arches of the skeleton. A thin vein appears in the egg; light spills out. The egg rolls and erupts in a pillar of fire. I am in a cathedral; the fire is my gospel. It travels up into the sky in a giant helix and as it begins to reach the extent of its height, the bird returns, traveling slightly higher than the flames in a tight spiral, until at last its magnificent wings are released, restoring light to the world. It cries out and sets off on its journey once more. ▲

SUBMARINE SOUL

BY RICKY BARAJAS



Oh,
How I wish I could breathe underwater,
To
Dive beneath the surface,
To
Look up and watch the sunlight dance,
With no
Rhythm
In particular.

Oh,
How I wish I could breathe underwater,
To
Follow the path that's formed by the full moon
To
Sink down into darkness.
Comforted,
Caressed,
Held by the current.

Oh,
How I wish I could breathe underwater,
To
Swim as fast as I can,
To
Not be held back by the burn of my lungs,
To
Be free.

PHOTO // ANDRE NGUYEN



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