

Fall 2009

# The Phoenix

Catherine Jean Pond  
*SIT Study Abroad*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection)



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Pond, Catherine Jean, "The Phoenix" (2009). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 789.  
[https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection/789](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/789)

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact [digitalcollections@sit.edu](mailto:digitalcollections@sit.edu).

# The Phoenix

Catherine Jean Pond

## Table of Contents

1. Prologue
2. Womb
3. At the pagoda
4. Vipers
5. Return
6. What burns
7. Dead things
8. Seaweed + Anchor
9. Dragons
10. Becoming the bat
11. Campuchia
12. The Cave
13. Epilogue for the phoenix
14. Epilogue for the other creatures in your life

## The Birdcage

No rose yet felt myself abloom, no bird yet rode in ether +  
--*The Master Letters*, Emily Dickinson

The phoenix glowed red as a planet and like some pale moon I revolved around it.  
It was my altar, my incense, all the wings inside. I hung strings of every color  
from its cage. When happy, it twisted the strings in its mouth and made soft sounds.  
And then, it was my moonlute.

\*

One day, I was pulled off into an orbit. It was long and endless, and fell off into space.  
They called it “the war.” Walking through each day a feather would fall and turn  
my eyelids red—it was the only color left in a drained world. Everything else lost shape.

\*

When I returned, I was fragmented. The phoenix felt this. I took the strings in my fingers.  
I only wanted to touch it once more, to see that it breathed for me still. I pulled and  
pulled: *make the world glow again*. But the cage crashed down over me. By then,  
the phoenix was gone and the strings had lost their color. And the birdcage—  
I slept alone in it.

## Womb

At night, I float down Tran Hung Dao,  
where the Indian embassy  
illuminates the unborn orchids.  
Pure and green; I sleep in them.  
Twisted in their stems I am light, wingless,  
and nothing hurts because nothing is born.  
I never think of you:  
I curl and lick the inside petals  
and have no need for eggs.

At the pagoda

1

The Hmong woman had dead hands.  
In daylight they were dark purple—

in prayer they were the black bones of birds.  
In fog they were steel cranes doubled over a horizon.

2

I did not pray. I folded my hands and waited.  
Always you came, trembling forward in my memory.

You, fallen on the ice—your cold hands  
reaching to me from some dark, unobtainable place.

3

Today it was the touch of the Hmong woman  
that woke me from you. Banyan leaves

pooled like sea-foam in the courtyard—  
she walked me through them, breaking open each wave.

Vipers

With you gone I drink the honey liquor; bits of beehive  
break between my teeth. I drink until the world changes  
shape, until the grass moves in through the windows,  
up the walls. I find you in that dream-field, lying in the grass,  
ghost among the mulberry groves. There are serpents,  
great green vipers, which move through your hair.  
They slither up your legs: I can feel them from here,  
moving inside you, turning you cold to me.  
Sometimes one goes in your mouth but you don't sputter.  
It's not like a nightmare where you can scream in your sleep.  
Instead, the snakes, you absorb them.

## Return

You would not come. I stood in the courtyard.

The lychees fell from the trees, slowing with my gaze.  
You would not come. I was growing wings;  
I was finding a way out. It began to rain.  
The chestnuts and *qua chom chom* made such a clatter,  
pounding at my feet. Already I was flying from the courtyard—  
O you would not come. And then—  
the fruits went still, and all the falling things inside.  
You had come. A rucksack, some old shoes, green raincoat:  
there you were, heavy with the dead things  
you dragged. You stood still near a water buffalo,  
deep in the dirt and unable to choose direction.  
You looked into my eyes, suddenly aware—  
your face, as if stepping into a wound.  
Still, you had come. The wings were gone.  
A hard rain could hurt nothing now.

What burns

Phoenix feathers, twine from the honeysuckle tree—  
is that what burns in your hands—  
a crabapple orchard, the leaves illuminated



is that what—

or a phosphorous mangrove,  
the distant bruise of bombs in the sky

which later you pushed up hard into me,  
which later you left in me,

the wound I once reached for: the war, is that what's so bright—

Slam the door, I'll find you still.

I'll find you somewhere in you still.

Dead things

There is nothing for miles: when the sun blinks and lowers it softens an entire world.  
We lie together on the grass. Touch my face, I say. You shake your head. *Please.*

I'm heavy with the dead things, you say. *Please*. The dirt is hard and black under your fingernails. You leave it on my face, loose and dark. Under your hands I burn away: it's a new, hurting kind of flight. In that glowing place I close my eyes. I think: now a kiss, a string of micah, a dry sea. But the sun sets, just there, under your fingertips, and nothing comes forth from the dark. What was will not be born again.

## Sea-weed + Anchor

You never felt it before but now an anchored  
rope falls from his mouth deep into yours,

coiling around something loose and dark  
so when he moves away it shall pull quick and tight in you

and what's loose will all come to the surface--

(your mother's hair gathering rain underground,  
the big size of his hand on your face  
the first time)

and you think: here is the last kiss,  
which tastes of saltwater, lemons, his first love—

he thinks of her  
not you

when the sea-weed he dredged  
falls out on your lips, and the broken anchor too—

another broken anchor.

## Dragons

*for M• (Mother)*

Sidewalks trembled behind my mother  
as she walked to work. I blinked:

brick melted, rooftops rose and fell:  
dragons, whose tails burned an entire sky.

\*

I wore heavy wings throughout the afternoon.

I listened for her always: a step, a song, the sweep  
of a bicycle wheel through the rain.

But there was only the faded mango  
of the French buildings melting silently in the street

\*

At sunset, when she returned, the paint held still.  
Even the embassies glowed with new importance.

I was sleepy for her. And when again she held me,  
the dragons on the roof went still.

## Becoming the bat

You were growing wings. All night they rose and fell, rose and fell against me.  
Their pounding kept me awake. In the morning there was mist in your hair  
so I knew you'd gone out again, that the wings were forming fast.  
In the melaleuca forest, when you spotted the bats, you begged *let's go deeper in*  
but what you wanted was to lift from me, leave me. I knew it even then.

I was the surface of the water, the prism: your black shadow fell right past.

## Campuchia

You said you woke early and swam through the moss, with the snakes, though I never saw. In the rain the mangroves twisted and groaned like elephant trunks. Later, we went out in the boat so you could stroke the rough bark, what you could reach of it: the rest was underwater. You said you knew that underworld, swam through it, though I never saw. In the afternoon we climbed the watchtower, slept in hammocks. When the hot rain woke me, I studied you. Still there was something out of reach. I was the watchtower and you were Campuchia, sprawling and unreal across the river.

## The Cave

Your hands grip mine, forming the old familiar cave. The great things that happened in there, the terrible things. You press and unpress your palm to mine; the cave opens and closes. You are crawling in. You are planning a long stay. I follow—who else will carry you out? The stone breaks against my fingers. Here is our first kiss, here is our last. They fall, the small sharp rocks, into my hands. You go deeper and deeper into the cave. You would have me scrape the dirt from your eyelashes every morning. You would have me underground with you forever. I slip my hand out of yours, angling my body backwards through the closing gaps. When I look back, you've reached the center of the cave, and I'm almost to the surface. This time I will not carry you out.

## Epilogue for the phoenix

The rain here comes like a stampede of mystics,  
crying and throwing their hands against my window.  
They keep trying to tell me something.  
I keep telling them I don't have their phoenix anymore.  
It flew away even from me.

## Epilogue for the other creatures in your life

Last night I saw your unicorns pooled in a field sleeping.  
The moonlight came with its strong glow and their white skin  
bloomed in the light. But by morning the creatures were  
lost all over again. I saw just the white hair float  
for a moment then disappear. They will not last forever,  
you know. And they most certainly will not be back.



Sabrina Orah Mark on the prose poem ::

"There's a doll in a photograph of Hans Bellmer's-she's open at the• torso and where her navel should be is a wheel. Bellmer's plan,• though never carried out, was to attach to the wheel a rotating• disk lit by tiny colored bulbs operated by a button laced on the• doll's left nipple that would contain six wedged shape scenes : a• boat sinking into ice, sweet meats, a handkerchief dirty with• saliva and several pornographic shots. I often imagine this disk,• fixed to where the dolls navel should be, as the perfect image for• the prose poem, as both seem to maintain themselves through their• doubleness. There seems to exist a reason or center on one hand and• a spinning discentered randomness on the other. Charles Simic• writes that the prose poem is the result of two contradictory• impulses : prose and poetry. Therefore it cannot exist, but it• does. Thus, the prose

poem seems to insist already on a state of • marvel. Baudelaire in his preface to *Paris Spleen* admits that the • idea of the prose poem is a haunting one, and it came to him • exploring the city and "the medley of its innumerable • interrelations." To free a poem of its line break seems to free a • poem of its breath. The space on the right hand side of the page is • gone, as is the possibility for escape. The images inside the prose • poem, like the images on Bellmer's disk, and like the images of an • unconscious unbothered by formulaic breaks, seem to be very tightly • packed and tough and bright against each other, so that the prose • poem becomes a chamber with no way out, and becomes then the • perfect receptacle for haunt, because what is haunt if not a • breathing thing caught inside the house or the body or the box • without the possibility of an exit."