

Second Prize

The Frustrated Phoenix and the Very Big Fire

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Once upon a time there was a frustrated phoenix. He was frustrated because he was old, and just like people, birds can get creaky and cranky when they are old. But he was also frustrated because he was in England in 1819.

These things don't sound like they fit together, but they do. You see, a phoenix has a wonderful ability. When it gets old, it builds a nest and lights it on fire. A new phoenix is born from the ashes of the old phoenix's fire. That's where you get the expression "rising from the ashes." It means things come back to life after a terrible tragedy.

So yeah, phoenix. But there was a problem.

You see, 1810 was a very cold and wet year for England.

So was 1811.

So was 1812.

So was 1813.

So was 1814.

So was 1815.

So was 1816. (They called 1816 "the year without a summer.")

So was 1817.

So was 1818.

And so was 1819. After ten years of wet and cold, mushrooms were growing everywhere in England, the sheep were covered with slugs, bogs were spreading like the opposite of wildfire, and people were starting to forget what the sun looked like.

And that meant when the phoenix slowly built his nest, it looked kind of like a wet pile of grass. Because it was. Really wet. Really cold. Really just grass.

The phoenix tried setting himself on fire, but the best he ever got was three sparks before the rain drowned his flame. That was the best time. The rest of the time he just sat in the wet grass, shivering.

Eventually he gave up on his nest and went looking for help.

He asked a cow, but cows can start fires only if someone else already has a fire going, like Mrs. O'Leary's cow did when it started the Great Chicago Fire in 1871.

He asked a pig, but the pig was too busy wallowing in the mud to stay warm to help him. And besides, how many fires have pigs started, when you come down to it?

Finally the phoenix went to a human's house to ask for help. He rap-rap-rapped on the door with his beak.

No one answered.

He rapped again.

No one.

He rapped—and finally a very tired-looking man in a nightshift opened the door, just a crack. The phoenix explained what he wanted: big fire, burn himself alive, come back to life, could you help?

"Are you mental?" the human asked. And then he shut the door, right on the phoenix's beak.

And that made the phoenix really mad. I mean, all he wanted to do was start a tremendous fire so he could burn himself and return to life reborn young and strong. Was that so wrong?

His anger gave him new strength, at least for a moment. He flapped his mighty, if ragged, wings and rose into the night sky. Higher and higher he flew. Then he stopped. For a moment he hung there, silhouetted against the moon, and then he turned and plunged back down to earth.

Like a creaky old magic arrow, the phoenix went down, down through the sky, down through the clouds, down through the leaves, and eventually down through the roof of the local factory. This drove his mighty beak through the furnace and down into the ground.

The furnace blew up, sending hot metal rain everywhere into the moist, cool night. But for a time, the resulting fire was hot enough to let the phoenix be reborn. And so what had been old was new, what had been weak was now strong, and what had been slow was once again fast.

But. But even clad in fine new feathers, the phoenix remembered what it was like to not be able to light a fire. So he decided to make sure that never happened again. Once again he flapped into the sky. Once again he hung there, black against the cool white moon. And once again he turned down and drove his beak into the earth.

Down down down, until this time he drove his beak into the peat of Darbyshire. Just once, making a deep, sharp, puncture. And then he flew away.

But behind him, in Darbyshire, that hole did not stay empty. Nor, despite the rain, did it fill with water. Instead, oil began to seep up from the earth to fill the hole.

It took a while, but people eventually used that oil for lamps.

It took another while, but people eventually used that oil to power the Industrial Revolution.

And it took an even longer while, but burning that oil for that Industrial Revolution eventually warmed the Earth, changing the climate until no phoenix would ever have to worry about running into a cold wet winter in England—or anywhere else on the planet—again.

After that longer while, any phoenix anywhere could always make a really big fire.

When he's not writing, **Greg Beatty** walks with his dog, dabbles in the martial arts, plays with his grandchildren, and teaches college.