

Land Under Sky

by Bethany Sanders

[\(Jonathan's commentary is below, in blue\)](#)

On the edge of the long nights, when I shivered with the memory of dark dreams, my mama sat on the edge of my pallet and told me of the Phoenix. She told me that the passages between the worlds are the speckles on the shell of the Phoenix's egg. My mama said the passages appear and disappear in the turning of the restless worlds; for the worlds sleep fitfully in wait for the end of all things. For the end will be a beginning. The other bards would have cursed her stories as heresy, but as age weighs my limbs, I begin to feel an ache that is much like waiting.

I am now only an exile in a strange land, but I, Eleanor, last of the old bards, remember.

I took the firmament of my home for granted, for what could break the lid of the world? From the day of my birth till the day my life was riven in two, I could tilt my head back and see the glow of the bright vines tracing the grooves of the craggy roof. The crown of the world was as steady and permanent as its foundation. Now, on Earth, I am like a mouse scampering from cover to cover, my back bent under the weight of the unending sea of sky.

Here, during the waking hours, the naked eye of Earth's sun burns a path through the sky. Its light is not gentle like the light of the bright vines. The sun is only one source, but it is so bright that it scorches and blisters the skin. It is like a blacksmith's fire—white, hot, and searing—condensed into the shape of a lantern. You cannot look directly at the sun lest your eyes burn. You can only see the sun's countenance through other things. Once I held up a bottle of honey to my kitchen window, and the sun pierced the bottle with its blaze. The light—trapped by the honey—turned ever inward until gold was all that my eyes could see.

In the evening the sun passes behind the world and the sky grows dark. Sometimes, in the roofless expanse, I can see other worlds shining like lanterns far away. On nights like those, my heart aches.

Here, my grandson asks me which of the distant lights is Pelkern, but I do not know.

My grandson was only four days old when we carried him through the passage to Earth. Land under sky is all he has ever known. Over the years I have told him the stories of our people. I have tread the halls of my mind, seeking every story I know, but I fear only a few of the stories have taken root in him.

I am old now. They tell me the new bards on Pelkern forget the old stories and are taught to say lies. How much shall be lost with me?

But maybe my mama was right. If her tales are true, then all will not be lost. The Phoenix knows the first and the last song. The Phoenix will remember.

Bethany—

First, I love this idea of a person for whom the idea of an open sky is a foreign concept—a person who is an exile from a world where there's a cozy dome instead of a sky. That idea fires the imagination and makes me want to know where it's going to take you (and the reader).

It has become customary in these Line Edits commentaries for me to acknowledge that the writer was up against an arbitrary 500-word limit. This piece feels overcrowded in ways that it probably wouldn't have been if you had more room to stretch your legs; the good news is that this is part of a longer work in which you will have plenty of leg-stretching room. But for the purposes of this commentary, I'm going to talk about what you can accomplish (and perhaps what you'd better not try to accomplish) in a 500-word space.

Your biggest challenge here is one that I see all the time in fantasy writing: how do you have an exalted, other-worldly tone and voice without making the reader work too hard to understand what you're talking about. By definition, fantasy writing is otherworldly; it is appropriate for your tone to be otherworldly, foreign-feeling. That's a big part of the fun in fantasy literature. On top of that, your narrator is a bard, so we would expect her language to be exalted and perhaps a little difficult, and your narrator's language is. The trick here is to create the *impression of* otherworldliness, foreignness, exaltedness, and difficulty without your language actually being difficult.

I'm going to go through your first six sentences, sentence-by-sentence, and look at some ways to make your language easier to understand while still (hopefully) keeping that exalted, slightly other-worldly tone.

Sentence 1:

On the edge of the long nights, when I shivered with the memory of dark dreams, my mama sat on the edge of my pallet and told me of the Phoenix.

By "the edge of the long nights," I think you mean the overlap between night and morning. But you could be talking about the front edge of night. Or something else. It seems to me that "the edge of morning" is a little less ambiguous, while still feeling a unfamiliar. You can also add a phrase that clarifies while still feeling unfamiliar, like so:

On the edge of morning, while the long night still held sway, my mama sat on the edge of my pallet...

Or, if you want to keep "the edge of the long nights":

On the edge of the long nights, before the morning came into my chambers...

Your target here is language that is unfamiliar but unambiguous. (And, by the way, it's not like this first sentence is a bad sentence. But little things start to add up.)

Sentences 2-4:

2. She told me that the passages between the worlds are the speckles on the shell of the Phoenix's egg. 3. My mama said the passages appear and disappear in the turning of the restless worlds; for the worlds sleep fitfully in wait for the end of all things. 4. For the end will be a beginning.

In Sentence 1 we were talking about word choice. Here we need to talk about sentence structure. There are a lot of unfamiliar ideas for readers to process in these sentences. You need to help them along with the sentence structure.

Look what happens when you rearrange Sentence 2 so that you lead with the Phoenix egg:

The speckles on the Phoenix egg are the passages between worlds, she said.

This revision accomplishes a few things:

1. In the original, all the important information is packaged into a "that" clause serving as the direct of the object "told." In this revised sentence, the important information is in the main clause.
2. For the sake of simplicity, I got rid of "the shell of." To say that there are speckles on the egg is to say that there are speckles on the shell of the egg. If it's important to you to mention the shell (which, I suppose, is the "firmament" of the egg), you can bring it back.
3. I also called it the Phoenix egg instead of the Phoenix's egg. Your original is more precisely correct, but I'd be willing to trade precision for simplicity in this case.

But by far the most important thing that this revision accomplishes is that it moves the idea of the Phoenix egg right next to the Phoenix at the end of Sentence 1, creating an easy transition from idea to idea. In the original, I'm waiting 17 words to find out how Sentence 2 relates to Sentence 1. That's a long time to wait when we're talking about something as unfamiliar as passages between worlds and speckles on a Phoenix egg.

And look what else happens when we flip-flop Sentence 2: now "passages between worlds" is toward the end of the sentence, leading right into the passages at the beginning of Sentence 3!

This is a great time to talk about helpful repetition and unhelpful (and possibly annoying) repetition. The repetition of important and possibly unfamiliar ideas can be a huge help to your reader, connecting one sentence to the next, like so:

Mama told me about the Phoenix. The speckles on the Phoenix egg are passages between worlds. The passages appear and disappear in the turning of the worlds. The worlds sleep fitfully, waiting for the end. The end will be a beginning.

Writing teachers often encourage students to avoid repetition. But your use of repetition here is vitally important. How else am I going to navigate these very surprising ideas?

However, there's a less helpful kind of repetition, and you have some of that in this passage too. Sentences 1, 2, and 3 all include "Mama told" (or a close variant). And then the last two clauses both start with "for" (not to mention the "for" that sits between them). That kind of repetition is just aggravating to the reader. You need to revise some of it out.

Sentence 5

The other bards would have cursed her stories as heresy, but as age weighs my limbs, I begin to feel an ache that is much like waiting.

We've talked about word choice (edge of night v. edge of morning in Sentence 1), and we've talked about sentence structure (Sentences 2-4), but revising Sentence 5 is really going to be about considering how ideas fit together and (more importantly) deciding how much work you want the reader to do. In this sentence, you have four ideas conveyed in four clauses:

- The other bards would have cursed Mama's stories as heresy.
- Age weighs down the narrator's limbs.
- The narrator starts to feel an ache.
- That ache feels like longing.

It's not self-evident to the reader how these ideas connect or why they are all in one sentence. I think your point is that even though the prevailing wisdom is that the Phoenix egg business is heretical, the older the narrator gets, the more she believes that the stories are true, and this conviction puts an ache and longing in her.

I (the reader) had to do some work to make those connections. As I said, these connections aren't self-evident. In your defense, if they were self-evident, they probably wouldn't be worth writing about. Furthermore, it's not hard to imagine an old woman saying something like Sentence 5; it's confusing in the way that utterances in the real world are often confusing. It's not at all unusual for a person to skip steps and fail to make connections that seem obvious to the speaker but not to the listener. So it is possible that you *want* your reader to have to work this hard to make these connections. It depends on your goals here.

I would advise, however, giving the reader a little more help. First, I would make separate the first clause out as its own sentence; that way the reader doesn't waste

any effort trying to make a closer connection between ideas than is actually there. And then I think I would add just one phrase in the second sentence to add a little more clarity. So you'd end up with something along these lines:

The other bards would have cursed her stories as heresy. But as age weighs my limbs, I ache for my mother's stories—and the ache feels much like waiting.

Sentence 6

I am now only an exile in a strange land, but I, Eleanor, last of the old bards, remember.

In Sentence 6 you convey some important information. But you need to ask yourself, does the reader need this information NOW? Up to this point, our narrator has been telling a story. In the process of hearing her story, we have picked up information, but it hasn't felt like she's in information-conveying mode. But here she pauses to give information: "I, Eleanor, last of the bards..." I can easily imagine her announcing at the beginning of the story, "I am Eleanor, last of the bards..." and then launching into her story. But six sentences into your story is a strange time to pause and say, for instance "I, Bethany, creator of webcomics..."

Writers often overestimate how much information their readers need at the beginning of a story, so they rush to give necessary background information. The narrator's name and her role as a bard are both necessary pieces of information. But your reader is willing to wait until it comes out more naturally. Toward the end of the piece, your narrator gets on the subject of the new bards on Pelkern:

I am old now. They tell me the new bards on Pelkern forget the old stories and are taught to say lies. How much shall be lost with me?

That would be a great place for the narrator to give her job description.

I am old now. The last of the old bards. They tell me the new bards...

See how that feels more natural? We still don't know that her name is Eleanor, but you can keep waiting for a natural place to introduce that information—maybe in a bit of dialogue later in the story.

Ok, in those first six sentences I think I've covered all the principles I'd like you to consider as you try to find a voice and tone that *feel* exalted without being overly difficult. Here are those first six (now seven) sentences, revised:

At the edge of morning, while the night still held sway and I shivered with the memory of dark dreams, my mama sat on the edge of my pallet and told me of the Phoenix. The speckles on the Phoenix egg are the passages between the worlds, she told me. And the passages appear and disappear in the turning of the restless worlds. The worlds sleep fitfully as they wait for the end of all things; for the end will be a beginning.

The other bards would have cursed her stories as heresy. But as age weighs down my limbs, I ache for my mother's stories—and the ache feels much like waiting.

I am now only an exile in a strange land, but I remember.

This revised version is a little easier to follow, I think, but it has kept that exalted, otherworldly voice.