



On Earth As It Is

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Dear God

Ethel Rohan

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on earth as it is

prayer as story, story as prayer

HOME

ABOUT

AUTHORS

CONTACT



photo by matthew simmons

Dear God

Ethel Rohan

Dear God,

I remember, as a girl, I could fly. I also remember You visited often. Not a luminous light, or an apparition, or anything I could hear or touch. You were a presence, a comfort, a knowing. Back then, I didn't need faith. I had certainty.

It's still so real to me, my flying. I circled our back garden, higher, higher, ecstatic, and looked down at my brothers and sisters, and sometimes our cousins, all playing together on the concrete, and Mammy hanging out clothes on the red rope line, steam rising off the sodden garments, off her tired hands. I called and called, but no one ever looked up. I hovered by Mammy's ear, but she never heard.

As a girl, I believed we were angels before we came to earth. That we could fly until something of this world stripped us of our wings. Our weightlessness. It never occurred to me then that I was the only person I knew who could fly, that I was alone up there with the birds and airplanes and clouds and You. Never struck me, either, that I only ever flew over my house.

When I was a teenager, and could no longer fly, I tried to dance my way back into that weightless feeling, into defying gravity. I flapped my arms, flapped and flapped, and leaped, but I couldn't stay airborne. I started to worry that I had only ever flown in my dreams. You didn't visit as often. It was okay. When I needed You most, You showed up and stayed a while. You didn't do or say anything, but the feeling of You went a long way.

I'm a woman now, with faith and fear and pain. You never visit anymore. Maybe I don't ask right or wait long enough. Maybe you're like Santa Claus and only come to children. Maybe there's too many of us to get around and I got my fair share already. I miss You. I'd like

that knowing feeling back, to have certainty again. I don't want to have to need faith. I want to remember how to fly, to feel You with me again.

When I was a girl, my mother and aunts and grandmother talked together in our dark kitchen. They often wondered about God, about heaven and hell and purgatory. This, this is purgatory, my aunt said, here we're tested and once it's over we either go to heaven or hell. This is hell, Mammy said. Granny promised to return after she died, if she could, to tell us everything. If I don't come back, she said, there's probably nothing.

Maybe in old age everything will come full circle. I'll fly again and You'll visit. Or maybe that's for life after death. I wonder when You'll take me, God, and how. I hope You take me gently, and not for decades yet. There's so much more I want to do, to find out. I suppose most everyone says the same.

Mammy was wrong. This life isn't necessarily hell. It's whatever we can make of it. Mammy's sister was right. Life is a test. Maybe the ultimate test is to learn how to be God to ourselves and to others. Perhaps that's why You leave us, God, and allow us to forget how to fly. Like the best parents, You show us how it's done and then make us do for ourselves.

Yours in the shadow of certainty,

Ethel

Irish-born Ethel Rohan now lives in San Francisco. Her most recent work has appeared in *Guernica*, *Fringe* and *971 MENU*. Her story collection, *Cut Through the Bone*, is forthcoming from Dark Sky Books in December. A second story collection, *Hard to Say*, is forthcoming from PANK in Spring, 2011.

<---Next Previous--->