

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

## The Sparrow's Quest

By Elizabeth Laird  
2009

*"The Sparrow's Quest" comes from a collection of Iranian short stories, retold by Elizabeth Laird. Laird is a British writer known for her children's fiction and her collections of folktales from other countries. As you read, take notes on what the sparrow learns from each thing it encounters.*

- [1] A hungry sparrow, one cold winter's day, fluttered about hunting for something to eat. At last she saw a movement on an icy pond.

Aha! she thought. A grub!<sup>1</sup> and down she swooped, hoping for a meal.

But there was no grub, only a twig blowing in the breeze.

The ice was so cold that the sparrow's feet began to sting.



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- [5] "Oh, cruel ice!" she exclaimed. "Nothing has ever hurt me as much as this. There's no one else like you, who can give a poor little bird such pain. How does it feel to be the greatest power there is?"

The ice creaked and cracked as a laugh shivered along his bright surface.

"Powerful? Me?" he growled. "How wrong you are. The sun is much stronger than I am. When the spring comes, he'll shine his hot rays down on me and I'll splinter and melt away. You must ask the sun how it feels to be powerful, little bird."

The sparrow, glad to lift her feet from the ice's freezing surface, flew up and up into the sky, as close to the sun as she dared.

"Tell me, great sun," she chirped, shielding her face with a wing from the sun's blinding rays, "are you the greatest power there is? I thought it was the ice, but he tells me you'll melt him away when the spring comes."

- [10] Flames shot out from the sun's fiery heart, threatening to singe<sup>2</sup> the sparrow's feathers.

"The greatest power on earth?" he roared. "It's not me, no no, not me. How could it be, since the clouds can cover me and hide me from below? Ask the clouds, sparrow. Ask the clouds."

1. a growing insect that is often food for birds  
2. to burn slightly or to burn the ends of

The sparrow flew on, seeking refuge<sup>3</sup> from the sun's tremendous<sup>4</sup> heat in the wet mistiness of the clouds.

"Cool wet clouds, mighty storm clouds, are you greater than the sun?" she asked. "For that's what he tells me."

Lightning flickered and thunder groaned all around, making the sparrow's feathers shiver.

[15] "Powerful? Not us," rumbled the clouds. "The wind can blow us anywhere it chooses. Go and ask the wind."

The wind picked up the sparrow and tumbled her about in its gusts and eddies<sup>5</sup> until she hardly knew where she was.

"Stop, wind! Is it true what the clouds have told me, that you are the greatest power there is?" shouted the sparrow.

The wind snatched up flurries of leaves from the ground below and played with them as it answered, "Little sparrow, how can that be? There is something I can never move, however hard I blow. The mountain is more powerful than me. Go to the mountain and ask him."

The sparrow flew to the mountain, and perched on the very top.

[20] "Mountain, can you hear me?" she sang out. "The wind tells me that you are more powerful even than him. Are you the greatest thing on earth?"

Deep inside the mountain, rocks clashed and ground together, before at last the mountain spoke.

"Look around you, little bird. Grass covers me from my feet to the crown of my head, and there's nothing I can do to shake it off. Ask the grass who is most powerful here."

So the sparrow, looking down at the grass, called out, "Grass, grass, did you hear the mountain? Are you the most powerful thing there is?"

The blades of grass all around her shook and rattled as a thousand voices called out in reedy<sup>6</sup> tones, "Oh sparrow, how can you think we are powerful, when worms can burrow through us and disturb our roots?"

[25] The sparrow, who was very tired by now, and faint<sup>7</sup> with hunger, looked around until she saw a worm hole. She stood above it and called down, "Worm, are you there? The grass tells me how powerful you are — the most powerful thing on earth. Tell me, is it true?"

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3. **Refuge** (*noun*): a place of shelter, protection, or safety  
4. **Tremendous** (*adjective*): very great in amount or intensity  
5. strong and whirling bursts of wind  
6. high and thin in tone  
7. weak and dizzy

The humble<sup>8</sup> worm had never been asked such a question before. Unwisely, he poked his head out of his hole, and sighed, "Oh, how I wish I was! Then I would never be afraid of being eaten by a hungry sparrow."

Too late, he saw who it was who had called down to him, for at that moment the sparrow opened her beak and began to gobble him up.

Just before he disappeared altogether, the worm managed to gasp, "How does it feel then, cruel sparrow, to be the greatest thing on earth?"

The sparrow swallowed, and wiped her beak on the grass.

[30] "A little less hungry," she said.

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## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which sentence describes the theme of the story?
  - A. The largest creatures tend to be the most powerful.
  - B. The environment is more powerful than the animals that live in it.
  - C. It is always more important to be clever than it is to be strong.
  - D. Even if we're small, we sometimes have more power than we think we do.
  
2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "Flames shot out from the sun's fiery heart, threatening to singe the sparrow's feathers." (Paragraph 10)
  - B. "Little sparrow, how can that be? There is something I can never move, however hard I blow. The mountain is more powerful than me." (Paragraph 18)
  - C. "The sparrow, who was very tired by now, and faint with hunger, looked around until she saw a worm hole." (Paragraph 25)
  - D. "the worm managed to gasp, 'How does it feel then, cruel sparrow, to be the greatest thing on earth?'" (Paragraph 28)
  
3. Which of the following best describes why the sparrow begins her search for the most powerful thing on earth?
  - A. She believes that she is the most powerful creature on earth and wishes to prove it to the rest of the world.
  - B. She is hungry and hopes that the most powerful thing on earth will be able to provide her with food.
  - C. She learns that there are things in nature that are more powerful than what originally harmed her.
  - D. She is searching for food and assumes that the most powerful thing on earth will be a worm she can eat.
  
4. Why does the author have the sparrow repeat the lines "are you the greatest power there is" or "are you the most powerful thing" to every other character she meets in the story?
  - A. to show that there is always something more powerful when you compare yourself to others
  - B. to emphasize that the sparrow is the weakest creature, compared to everyone she meets
  - C. to show that it's unlikely the sparrow will ever meet the most powerful thing on earth
  - D. to reveal how little knowledge the sparrow has about other creatures

5. How does the sparrow's conversation with the worm affect how she feels at the end of the story?

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