



THE TRIBUTARY

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Alex Holland

Burn to Ashes

On this eve, I hast foreseen a ghastly future. Tis with sorrow I sayeth our venerable kingdom shall not be everlasting. A mage shall cometh forth with a familiar never before seen. With untold power, the mage shall rend our great kingdom to shreds.

-Ezereth Magdoor, Royal Soothsayer

The cold air of the train car brushed against the back of Tem's neck. She leaned back against the padded booth and wrapped her arms around herself. Without her hands to hold it open, her book, *Noteworthy Mages and Their Familiars*, closed itself. It didn't matter that she'd lost her place; Tem had only been staring at the pages unseeingly. She knew the book like the back of her hand, anyway.

Liam, Tem's father, raised his eyes from his blueprints to look at her knowingly. "You cold?" He asked, wrapping a strong, warm arm around her shoulders and pulling her into his side.

The question was a rhetorical one. Tem was always cold. She gave a small hum and turned her head to gaze out of the window. This side of the train was pressed against the slope of the mountainside. Tall trees and dense thickets blurred

together. They were so close that if the window were open, Tem might have been able to reach out and touch the leaves.

“Hey,” her dad said gently, “look at me.” Tem turned and took in her dad’s expression: his tan skin, hooded hazel eyes, straight nose, and salt-and-pepper full beard and short hair. His closed-mouth smile made his eyes squeeze together slightly. “Everyone’s nervous on their Familiar Ceremony day. On my day,” he said with a chuckle, “this kid a few places ahead of me nearly fainted when it was almost his turn. He had to sit out for a while and ended up going after me.” The story was meant to be comforting, but it made Tem worry if she’d faint, too. Dad could read it on her face. “Relax, kid. You’ll be just fine. I mean, that guy already looked sick when I got there. He was white as paper and could hardly stand straight. Apparently, he took too long to set a date for his Ceremony and had to wait about four months after his birthday until he could get into the city’s Summoning Center. His familiar wasn’t happy about being put off for so long, obviously, and was beating his ass from the inside. Stupid, right?”

It was. Familiars manifest within a person on their twentieth birthday, but bringing them out requires a special ritual. These rituals are performed by licensed summoners at Summoning Centers. The closest Summoning Center was in the city Aeralis over the mountains. With a population nearing one hundred thousand, rituals had to be scheduled months in advance. Familiars want to come out as soon as possible, and waiting too long can cause illness.

Tem’s twentieth birthday was only a week ago. She shouldn’t be having any negative side effects so soon, and yet

her heart had been pounding hard and fast, and her body had been feeling weak. Her parents believed it to just be nerves. Tem feared it meant that her familiar had to be strong, but she didn't understand why.

Familiars are sorted as low class, middle class, or high class based on one component: magic. Low class familiars are ordinary animals that had no magic. Middle class familiars are rarer creatures with varying degrees of magic. High class familiars are creatures of legend that award magic as strong and unique as the familiar.

Both of her parents' familiars were low class, so hers should be the same. The way she was feeling... she'd only ever heard of high class familiars causing symptoms so soon. But only nobles and royalty had high class familiars. Tem's family was as low class as they come.

Tem's mother, Lace, tossed her caramel braid over her pale-skinned shoulder and lowered her embroidery hoop. "Your dad is right, Tem. Tonight you'll have your familiar, and all will be right with the world."

"Okay," Tem assented. She just wanted the conversation to end.

"What's your familiar saying?" Dad asked, unable to take a hint.

Familiars can speak telepathically with their human but only after being summoned. Before that, they can only share emotions and vague ideas. Tem had been trying to ignore her familiar all week. She didn't know how to describe it. Even without words, it sang to her, somehow. She tried not to think about what it was saying.

“It’s excited,” she said simply. Her parents finally let her be. Tem rested her head on her arms, closed her eyes, and zoned out.

Standing outside of the train station, Tem wasn’t sure she’d make it to the Summoning Center. She hadn’t gotten out from under the awning before her dad was pulling her back by her shirt. The person she’d accidentally cut off gave her a strange look before disappearing into the crowd. The *crowd*. Hell, there had to be more people on this street than in her whole town. And they were all so close together, she couldn't see through them.

“Careful, kid,” Dad warned. “With so many people so close together, you really have to pay attention to your surroundings.”

“Okay,” Tem said quietly, attaching herself firmly to his side.

Her mother occupied her other side. “The Center isn’t far. We have plenty of time, so let’s get a bite to eat and do some window shopping. Does that sound alright?” Mom’s face was bright with an excited smile. She was born and raised in a city– not one nearly as large as Aeralis, but still big enough to have a train station.

Tem hummed her agreement. She was happy to do anything as long as it kept her away from the Summoning Center. As they walked, she fixed her eyes on the shops they passed. It was no surprise that her mother was so eager to shop; she was a seamstress, one of less than ten at home, and they had already passed about a dozen clothing and embroidery shops in just a few minutes. Tem remembered her mother mentioning that there was a fashion district not far from the train station. The smell of coffee brought her

from her thoughts as they approached a café. She knew that they would be eating there before her mother confirmed it aloud.

The café had more space than a house, and nearly every inch was filled with people. Mom said it was one of the best in the city. They were seated by a window looking out into the cobblestone street, and that is where Tem focused her attention after ordering a simple sandwich and a cup of coffee with liquor. There were all kinds of people walking by. Some wore working clothes, some wore dresses and suits, and some wore everything in between. Sparkling jewelry also caught her eye: earrings, necklaces, bracelets, brooches, buckles, and pins of all shapes, sizes, and colors. Tem rubbed her necklace. It was a carnelian gemstone, about half the length of her longest finger, cut in the shape of a teardrop, and it was held by a thin silver chain. *Carnelian imbues you with power and confidence*, her mother had said after gifting the necklace to Tem.

Two other things stood out to her. First, very few people had their familiars with them. The largest one she'd seen so far was a dog the color of oak wood that barely surpassed her human's knees. She supposed that with so many people in the streets, there wasn't much room left for familiars. Second, many of the familiars were wearing clothes. Mom sometimes made hats for hers and Dad's familiars, but these ones had whole outfits. Even the horses driving carriages had accessories. Tem could picture her mother with a shop in this city, sewing matching clothes for people and their familiars. She had half a mind to ask for a matching set with her own familiar.

Her familiar. Damn. The adorable image in Tem's mind melted and her anxiety came rushing back. If her familiar is a middle or high class like she suspects, she'll have to go to a mage academy to study magic. All magic users were required to attend an academy for at least one year. They cost money—how much? Would they be able to afford it? Maybe there were scholarships...

Her thoughts were interrupted by the waiter arriving with their food. Tem's stomach turned at the smell of it. The sandwich might have been good any other day, but today Tem took small bites and picked at the ingredients as she chewed slowly. Her parents gave her concerned looks but said nothing about it.

After they ate, it was time to go to the Summoning Center. The walk was disappointingly short. Tem entered the large, wooden double doors and felt as though her fate was sealed when they closed behind her. Inside, still life paintings depicting fruit and flowers hung between windows on the stone wall. The shiny wood floor—walnut, Tem heard her father mutter—had a double basket weave design. Rows of chairs occupied the room. About half of the chairs were filled with small families, some with twenty-year-olds and some without. At the far end was a counter made of large bricks with a plain-looking woman sitting behind it.

“Hi, welcome! Can I have your name please?” She asked with a smile.

Tem held her hands together nervously. “Themis Athenes,” she answered quietly.

“Thank you,” the woman replied. “I'll let them know you're here, and they'll call you back when they're ready.”

Tem nodded and chose a seat against the wall. Her parents sat on either side of her. She played with her fingers and bounced her legs, avoiding their eyes. Mom placed her hand on Tem's leg, either to comfort her or keep her still, but Tem kept bouncing. Dad tried to wrap an arm around her shoulder, but she shrugged him off.

"Hey," Dad said gently. "Why are you so nervous? Getting your familiar is a good thing! You're acting like we're at a doctor's office."

Tem was too wound up for humor. "It kind of feels like one," she mumbled.

Mom waved at Dad to stop. "Honey," she started. "What has you so worked up?"

Tem gathered her thoughts for a few moments. "I feel like something could go wrong."

"Like what?"

"I... I don't know."

"Then *try* to stop worrying, please," Mom pleaded. When Tem didn't respond, she asked, "Do you want us to go back with you?"

"No," Tem answered quickly. "I want to go by myself."

"Okay," Mom sighed, defeated.

Tem felt bad for worrying her parents, but she didn't have the energy to act like she wasn't anxious. She stewed in her thoughts for a time that felt both slow and too fast.

The door next to the brick counter opened, and a man with dark skin and the curliest hair Tem had ever seen stepped out and scanned the waiting room. "Themis Athenes?"

Her heart dropped to her stomach. She stood after a few agonizing seconds when her father nudged her. “We’ll see you in a little while, “ Dad said. Her parents waved as she left them.

The man smiled warmly and held the door open as she walked towards him. “Hello, Themis, my name is Za’iid. I’m excited to be your Summoner today. Follow me.” Za’iid led her down a long hallway with a few turns. Tem’s legs felt weak, and she thought she might collapse. They came upon double wooden doors that Za’iid opened and ushered her into. The room was large, about twenty-five feet by twenty-five feet and fifteen feet tall, all made of stone. To the right was a large wood desk and bookshelves. Taking up a large portion of the floor was a white summoning circle made of geometric lines and runes. Za’iid gestured to the center of the circle. “Stand there, please.”

Tem made her way and shook out her arms.

“No need to be nervous,” he assured. “The summoning only takes a few minutes and isn’t hard at all. All you’ll feel is some tingling as your familiar manifests.” Za’iid gathered some magic components from his desk and began placing them around the circle. When he finished, he stood in front of Tem, at the edge of the circle, and held his hands open at his sides. “Ready?”

Tem forced deep breaths in and out. She felt colder than she’d ever been before. Her limbs trembled and she was lightheaded. But she nodded; there wasn’t another choice. Za’iid began speaking in a language she didn’t understand. Pale blue light emanated from his palms and flowed down gently to the floor like fog. It slowly filled in the lines of the summoning circle. When the light reached her feet, it floated

up and began to surround her. Something tightened below Tem's ribs. Za'iid's magic fed it and it grew bigger — and hotter. It *burned*. She wanted to cry out, to make the summoner stop, but the mass had left no room in her lungs for air. Tem clutched her chest and doubled over. Za'iid's chanting stopped, but he didn't dare enter the circle. He ran around it and out the doors, shouting, but Tem couldn't hear him over her heart pounding in her ears. The mass expanded down into her belly, then up to her head, then to her arms, hands, legs, and feet. Everything burned, so hot it was cold, then hot again, then cold, and over again. Tears evaporated as soon as they touched her skin. The blue glow of Za'iid's magic turned red and orange like Tem's carnelian necklace. Then it burst into flames. Tem thrashed on the ground, trying to put out the fire. But magic fire couldn't be put out by normal means. She looked down at herself, expecting to find her clothes burned into nothing and her skin charred black, but she was completely unharmed. She rolled onto her back when her vision began to fade.

In the next moment, the magic in her body expanded outside of her and rose into a giant ball of fire above her. Air rushed into Tem's lungs and she coughed so hard she nearly gagged. The ball of fire condensed, turning blue, then white. It became so bright she thought she might go blind, but she couldn't look away. She saw movement in her peripheral vision. Za'iid was back with help. Blue, green, yellow, and violet magic swirled in the air, but couldn't penetrate the heat of the fire. It began to cool, the seconds feeling like minutes, the fire becoming blue, and then red and orange. The fire receded and became solid feathers. Then it unfurled.

Hovering above Tem was a bird larger than any she had ever seen. It descended, placing talons sharper than any knife by Tem's sides and turned its head to stare with golden eyes. Suddenly, she was gazing not at the bird, but at herself on the stone floor. Her vision flickered between the two sights.

I am you. You are me.

Tem's mind cleared with the words. It— she— was right. All was right with herself and the world.

"It's a Phoenix," a woman quietly, fearfully.

Tem's breath caught in her throat. A Phoenix.

A mage shall cometh forth with a familiar never before seen.

There's never been a Phoenix familiar. There hasn't even been a sighting of one for centuries.

No, this *can't* be right.

No? The Phoenix scoffed, recoiling with offense.

Before Tem could respond, a multitude of magics washed over her, separating her from the Phoenix. The mental connection she had with her familiar was severed, and she began to panic. Struggling was futile; the magics cocooned tightly around her and began to seep into her body. Her skin crawled at the invasive feeling. After a few moments, the magics bloomed with a comforting warmth. Tem's limbs relaxed, and she felt as if she were floating before her eyes fluttered closed against her will.

Ashley Jones

Devil's Paradise

A loveless cage, a breath of fire,
burning, smoldering, of one's desire.

Heaving chest did arise,
he knew not of his untimely demise.

Flamelicked was his mortal soul,
he, untold, was never whole.

There she lay, soft and gentle,
unaffected by the Earth's mantle.

Her very presence did entice,
for she was his devil's paradise.

Generations

When I look at my son's face,
my own stares back at me.
It makes me wonder,

how could my own parents
do what they did,
with their own faces staring back.

Sweet Stargazer

Sweet stargazer tell me what you see,
when the world is so dark.
Do you see the lights of heaven as they be,
Or is it simply a fire that burnt its mark?

Sweet stargazer with eyes so blue
Do the planets align for you my sweet child?
For I wish they always do,
as to nurture your soul, all wonderful and wild.

Sweet stargazer, will you inherit the Earth?
Rise high above in the atmosphere, feet in the dirt.
Written in the stars before your birth,
Let it be known within growth there is no comfort.

Sweet stargazer be not afraid;
You will not take this journey alone.
For our world is full of other stargazers,
and you will find many who share your wonder.

Emily Peters

Two Earthlings

One lonely highway
To separate us
Your heels dug deep in the soft, swollen earth
Mine stay gnashing at an unyielding sea of gray
I find myself yearning
As I press my face against the glass
Breathing in your sight
Shell as white as the ashes that once filled your lungs
As bare as the ground you once laid upon
As the fire melted you away
I see God's cruelty
Two earthlings, that will never look into each other's eyes
Never will I feel your warm breath on my skin
No more shall you see the sun rise, to feel its warmth on
yours
Tell me friend, did you shine like a thousand suns?
Did you melt into the foliage, like a crow in the night?
I yearn to know your call
Emerging, the gentle chirps of a chick, as the air fills her
lungs
The sweet rumble of maternity that blows in the breeze,

fading softly

Tell me friend, did you love?

What remains of the part of you that nuzzled her to
sleep?

Were those empty sockets once filled with her reflection?

Did they weep when the fire burnt out, and her reflection
wasn't there?

Cursed are those who seek an image of dullness and
villainy

To make themselves more ignorant and holy

The truth as it is, stands 10 feet tall

Maw agape, as if to cry out

Still, a sound drowned in the sea of time

Cursed is this highway that is long, unrelenting

Perhaps I will walk backwards, for a time

Closer to peace, to perfection

Closer to you, my friend, my kin

Hunter Sanders

Nostalgia: 1989

The flash of the screen turning black was almost blinding for the small New York apartment. The 8-bit jingle that played with it had been heard for the eighth time in the last hour. After a little mistake of a jump, the words “Game Over” pulled up on the screen. A little boy with brown hair and blue airplane pajamas stomped his feet. Young Simon was upset by the message and threw the rectangle controller onto the couch behind him. A young, blonde girl in pink *Care Bears* pajamas got up from the same couch. Cheryl picked up the controller. *Castlevania* was never Simon’s forte; he preferred *Excitebike* and *Duck Hunt*. Cheryl preferred *The Legend of Zelda* personally, but they always enjoyed sticking around and playing the NES in their living room while their father was working. It was better to do that than feel the hot summer sun sometimes.

“It’s no fair!” Simon cried. He was known for his fits, but it made sense, given his lack of experience. “It’s too hard!”

“Be careful with the controller, Simon,” Cheryl said. “You don’t want to break it. You tried hard to have Dad buy you this console. You would have to wait till you’re eight for another controller.”

Simon sat down. “You could just ask for your ninth birthday. Think Dad will get us a Gameboy?”

Cheryl smirked. “Those things are too new and expensive. He won’t bite on that for a while. Besides, it doesn’t even have color yet. All the games have this ugly green color.”

“How do you know?” fussed Simon. “No one can get one yet.”

“About the color?” Cheryl realized she almost slipped up. “I –uh – saw someone at school with one. Had this ugly green color. He was able to get one before they sold out; says his uncle works at Nintendo. He said it was still fun though.”

“Lucky!” Simon exclaimed. After a minute of watching the screen, he gained a look of confusion. “Hey Cheryl, what’s a console?”

“Huh?” Cheryl replies.

“You called the Nintendo a console. What’s that?”

“Oh. It’s another name for a game system. Anyways, look. Here’s how you kill those wolves.” Cheryl started demonstrating it to Simon. “You have to squat to hit them with the whip.” After a moment, her player character reached a wall. “There’s even food hidden in some of the walls; you have to hit them.” After the character’s whip hit a wall, a section of it exploded, showing a turkey dinner.

“Woah! How did you know that?”

“I just figured it out.”

“This game is just too hard!”

“It’s meant to be hard. Every time you fail, you’re meant to try again. Eventually, you learn new stuff and get better.”

Cheryl continued to play, jumping over the black leopards and dodging the flying Medusa heads. She had done this for a while; she started out failing very early on. Eventually she

started remembering the patterns, getting farther and seemingly making some strides. However, she was never able to actually beat the game. She was just stuck in a loop of failing and starting over, watching the main character perish. She worked hard at it, but she was never able to complete it. She was sick of failing and repeating the same stages.

“Simon,” Cheryl begins. “You know you don’t have to go to camp this weekend.”

It was a topic that always brought an argument. A month prior, Cheryl noticed some boys in her class talking about a summer camp upstate. She had the idea to bring it to Simon and their father. Simon was ecstatic about the idea and convinced their father to sign him up. Simon then convinced his friends to ask their parents. Cheryl only suggested the idea to get some time to herself, a rare thing an older sister can ask for.

However, Cheryl currently felt different about it. She had been trying to convince him not to go, but Simon was adamant on going, often arguing about it. She just couldn’t seem to change his mind.

“But,” Simon says. “I want to.”

“I don’t think camps are that fun. You play outside in the dirt with all the animals and bugs. I really don’t think you should go. You won’t have me or Dad around for it.”

“But I wanna go! My friends are all going and it seems really fun! I wanna! I wanna! I wanna! Camp was your idea! I’m gonna tell Dad!”

“Don’t do that!” Cheryl exclaimed. “Okay. I won’t bring it up again.” Cheryl sighed and stared blankly at the screen.

After about an hour, Cheryl decided to take a break from the game. Simon got up and started looking at the cartridges on the bookshelf.

“What was the new game you bought yesterday?” he asked.

“*Dragon Quest*,” Cheryl answered. “Came out last week.”

After a minute of looking, Simon spoke. “I don’t see it anywhere.”

“Oh sorry. *Dragon Warrior*.” Another slip up.

“Why did you call it *Dragon Quest*?” asked Simon.

“I don’t know; I just got mixed up.”

“Is it hard?”

“It’s an RPG. It’s a lot of reading and math.”

“What’s an RPG?”

Cheryl stands up and picks up a can of New Coke from the kitchen fridge, shortly returning to the couch. “Role Playing Game. Everyone has a class that they follow. Each person takes turns to attack. As you fight, you level up and get stronger.” Cheryl took a sip of the drink. “Make sure your HP doesn’t reach zero or you’ll d-”

As Cheryl says this, she started choking on her drink, coughing violently and nearly vomiting on the floor. Simon stood up and put his hands on her back. After a minute, Cheryl was able to catch her breath.

“Are you okay?” Simon asked.

“I’m okay,” Cheryl answered.

“Are you crying? Your eyes are red.”

“I was choking; of course they’ll be red. I’m okay though. I caught my breath. I forgot these things are awful.” After

Simon gave her a questioning look, Cheryl elaborated, “New Coke is not as good as old Coke.”

Later that night, Cheryl and Simon were watching some cartoons on VHS. They started off with *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, a favorite of Simon’s. They stayed staring at the screen. Occasionally, Cheryl would glance at Simon, seeing him completely engrossed towards the screen. His eyes were completely lit up from the action and comedy in front of him. In a way, Cheryl was jealous of how much passion that little boy had in that cartoon. If the CRT TV didn’t brighten up the room, Simon’s pure joy did.

“Hey Simon,” Cheryl began. “Did you know each of the four turtles are named after Renaissance artists?”

Simon remained staring at the TV. “What?”

Cheryl repeated the question. This time, Simon looked back at her.

“What’s a Renaissance artist?”

Cheryl didn’t quite know how to answer that. “They’re famous artists. Painters. There’s Leonardo, Michelangelo, Donatello, Venus, and Raphael.”

“Who’s Venus?”

“Oh. Sorry. She’s just one of those famous artists. I got them mixed up.”

Simon continued to stare deeply into the screen. He was back into that world within the screen. Cheryl much rather preferred *Care Bears*, but seeing Simon so enamored in the cartoon made her appreciate it more. He had this look of bliss and excitement that Cheryl could never replicate.

“I want a pizza,” Simon stated, still staring at the screen.

Suddenly, the front door unlocked. Cheryl decided to get up to pick up a couple of things on the floor. Simon was still entranced.

“Did someone order a pizza?!” asked a hyperactive voice. A man entered the living room, holding two large pizza boxes. He was tall and lanky, wearing a green button-up with blue jeans. His brown hair connected to his full beard. His green eyes seemed enlarged by the large round glasses.

Cheryl looked up and sighed. “Hey, Kro-”

“Uncle Crawford!” cheered Simon as he got up to hug him.

Cheryl closed her mouth. She almost slipped up again.

“Easy, Kiddo,” Crawford said. “Don’t want me to drop the food.” He placed the food on the coffee table that was pushed to the side, looking at Cheryl.

“Dad’s not home yet,” Simon answered.

“Yeah,” Crawford sighed. “He said he was going to be working late.” He rolled up his right sleeve, revealing a very large golden watch, about the size of his hand. “It’s eight on the dot now. He still won’t be in for a few hours. That’s why I’m here with the best pizza in town.”

“Awesome!” Simon exclaimed as he grabbed a slice.

Cheryl went to the tiny connected kitchen and pulled some paper plates from one of the drawers. As she was getting the things together, she opened one of the bottom cupboards. Inside was a black lockbox that belonged to her father. The box was locked with a four number dial. Cheryl then rummaged her hands on the fourth dial.

“What number was it?” she whispered to herself. “It was Mom’s birthday, but what day in May was it?” After a minute of spinning, she closed the door, got the plates, and went back to the living room.

“Lost where the plates were?” asked Crawford.

“I had to get a chair to reach it,” Cheryl answered as she put the plates on the coffee table.

Crawford made note of the TV. “Ninja Turtles, huh?” He looked at Cheryl. “How many times have you seen this?”

“Not enough,” answered Cheryl as she took a bite.

“I love it,” Simon chimed in. “Michelangelo is my favorite; Cheryl likes Donatello. She said they’re named after artists.”

“That’s right, Simon. Cheryl’s really smart. No wonder she likes Donatello.”

Cheryl rolled her eyes. She decided to lock herself into her mind, enjoying the pizza in front of her as she gazed at the screen. She then started to let her mind wander in a direction that was nowhere near her physical location. She soon found herself lost, unable to see nor hear those around her.

She started to mumble; that mumbling eventually led to her singing.

“My tea’s run cold. I’m wondering why -

“I got out of bed at all.

“The morning rain clouds up my window,

“and I can’t see at all.

“And even if I could, it’ll all be grey,

“but your picture’s on my wall.

“It reminds me that it’s not so bad.

“It’s not so bad.”

“What was that?” asked Simon.

“Huh?” Cheryl asked, snapping back to reality.

“What were you singing?”

“Oh. Nothing really. I just made it up.”

“It sounded pretty.”

“Yeah,” Crawford added. “That sounded really good.

Sounds like a pretty little song. You should maybe write that down and see about singing that one day.”

Cheryl glared at Crawford. “I’m going to get me something to drink.”

“Can you bring me some water?” asked Simon, holding a plastic cup.

Cheryl smiled, picking it up. “Anything for you.”

Cheryl excluded herself from the living room, back to the kitchen. She put the cup in the sink and barely touched the faucet. While the sound of water seemed heavy, there was a small stream, slowly filling the cup. As this was going on, Cheryl returned to the lockbox, moving the third dial to 1, and trying all numbers on the fourth dial. When that didn’t work, she switched the third dial to 2 and tried again. That didn’t work either. She was left with one final combination. She changed the combination to 0530, unlocking the box. Cheryl grabbed the object inside and closed the cupboard. She started making her way back to the living room, overhearing Crawford and Simon speak.

“I see that you do, champ.” Crawford said. “It is funny how you share the name of the character in *Castlevania*. How are you feeling about camp? That should be – what – in about two days?”

“Yeah!” Simon cheered. “I’m really excited.”

“I bet you are.” Crawford rolled up his left sleeve, looking at his very large silver watch. “Roughly about 60 hours from now. Might be a very memorable experience.”

Cheryl walked into the room, holding a 9mm in her hand. Before anyone could react, she pointed it at Crawford and fired a round, giving a deafening pop from the close quarters. However, everything was silent.

Cheryl remained staring at Crawford, but the pistol was stuck. The slide remained stuck back, and the casing remained in the air about five inches from the gun. Cheryl could not move at all. The only thing that could move was her grip on the pistol. Crawford remained staring at her, even raising his left eyebrow. After about two seconds, Cheryl’s grip of the pistol loosened. In doing so, the rest of her body was free. The pistol remained stiff in the air. Cheryl walked around it and saw the bullet was stuck in place about three feet in front of the gun.

Cheryl looked to see that Simon was frozen. His eyes were staring at the general location of where Cheryl was standing. His eyes looked to be starting to widen, but remained still, giving an odd look. He still had a slice of pizza in his hand. The television was also paused at an awkward angle of Raphael’s face.

Crawford remained to stare and smirk at Cheryl. His face followed her as she looked around the room. The silver watch on his left wrist stopped moving, but the gold watch on his left wrist continued ticking. It was the only sound in the room.

“You almost gave it away with that Dido song. ‘Thank You’ doesn’t release until 1998; you’re nine years too soon. Or were you singing the Eminem remix, ‘Stan’ of 2000?” Crawford smiled. “You’re really trying to shoot me again? You are actually trying to shoot me again. You know, for a 20-year-old, you do seem a little childish here. Granted, you do have the body of a child.” Crawford started cleaning his glasses with a rather sad, distant look on his face. “As much as you want, you can’t kill me, sadly. I’m somewhat sorry for that.”

Cheryl sighed. “You and I both know that’s not why I shot you, Kronos; I can’t kill you. I just wanted to stop beating around the bush. I also didn’t want to have this conversation in front of him.” She points to Simon.

“That is true; you never do. So, have you finally learned your lesson?”

“I want to know how to fix it. How do I stop him from dying at camp?”

Kronos shook his head. “You say ‘fix’ like it wasn’t supposed to happen, but you cannot deny Fate nor the past. It already happened. I gave you this deal so you can understand that. However, you got it in your head that you can actually save him when you just can’t.”

“How do I prevent him from going to that fucking camp?!” Cheryl’s eyes started to tear up. “How do I save my brother?!”

Kronos sighed. “We already had this conversation. You must know that isn’t possible, especially after all the attempts before. Cheryl, how many loops are you in now? How many different methods did you try to stop him just for Fate to correct it? No matter what, he goes, and you find yourself at

the beginning of a new loop. You know you can't change fate; he is fated to go to that camp. That prisoner is fated to escape that prison, and he is fated to kill Simon once they accidentally meet."

"Dammit, Kronos! You know I—"

"I let you relive some of the past that you wanted. You get to see some of the nostalgia you crave, but I did it to help you move on. You're dealing with complex grief; that's what your therapist said. I told you from the beginning that it was impossible. You even tried to hurt Simon."

Cheryl charged at Kronos, screaming. After about three steps, she found herself unable to move. She was forced to stand still and listen.

"You tried to break his legs with a bat, and what happened? The wooden bat rotted instantly and shattered upon impact. He remained fine and went to the camp where he died."

"Shut up!"

"You found the prison's number and tried to warn them in advance. They really didn't take you seriously, but during the call, that prisoner broke out early because the discussion of a possible prison break created the opportunity to escape. He eventually found his way to that camp. Your father was not going to believe the imagination of an 8-year-old girl, so Simon of course made it to camp."

"I said shut up!"

"Not only had you tried to kill me, but you hid a gun in Simon's suitcase. At camp, he found it and tried to hide it in the woods. That prisoner found him, took the gun, and — well — you know the rest."

“Shut the fuck up!”

Kronos began walking over towards Cheryl. As he was in front of her, he sat down, appearing as if he was sitting on the air in front of her. He took his glasses off, pulled a cloth from his pocket, and began cleaning his glasses. He sighed. “I know you must hate me, but understand two things; not even I can control Fate, and I am actually trying to genuinely help you.”

Cheryl spat towards his face, but it was frozen in air before it could hit him.

Kronos sighed. “Cheryl, did you forget a part of my deal?”
“What?”

Kronos walked away, staring directly at the wall. After another heavy sigh, he turned around. “You were not healthy. Your grief made you lock away everyone, friends and family. You were isolated for years.”

“Get to the part I don’t know.”

“You blame yourself. I get it, so I tried to help you by making you understand that it was not your fault, to make you understand. You seem to have forgotten one part of the deal. I mentioned that you could go back, but your own time is not frozen.” Kronos revealed the still ticking golden watch. “You started this in 2002. I wasn’t worried about it at first, but you have been here for a long time. You have lost many years of your life to this; don’t let it destroy you.”

Cheryl’s eyes widened. By this point, Kronos let her go, and Cheryl dropped to her knees. A weak chuckle left her mouth as she saw her tears hitting the floor. She knew she had been working in this cycle of trying to get past Simon’s death date for a while, but she never knew exactly how long.

If the God of Time is telling her it's been a long time, she knew that it had to be quite some years. She's had similar conversations with Kronos for a bit, more times than she cares to count. She knew that she couldn't kill Kronos, and she knew deep down that she couldn't stop what had already happened. She honestly didn't know why she decided to break down about it all until now. She had heard the same speech over and over again.

"How long?" she asked.

"Long enough," Kronos answered. "You have suffered long enough."

"I was still suffering before you met me! You think I'm gonna feel better now?!"

"It's okay to remember the good times you shared with him. It's okay to hurt, but don't drown in it. Don't obsess over it." Kronos put his hand on Cheryl's shoulder. "I don't think he would want you to continue hurting yourself like this."

"What if I'm fated to suffer like this?"

"What if you're fated to recover? Stop asking what-ifs. If Fate would allow you to do something, it'll happen. If not, she'll stop you. You won't know until you try."

"Fate sounds like a bitch," smirked Cheryl with tears still rolling down her face.

"I haven't actually met her, but she can be at times. Other times, she can be angelic. She's technically my boss."

Cheryl chuckled. She stayed kneeling, trying to remember the deal in 2002. Flashes of it still linger in her mind.

It was Simon's birthday, and Cheryl, age 21, found herself in a foreclosed house, lying face-down on the hardwood floor. She had a nearly empty bottle of Bourbon in the grasp of her right hand. She began to raise her body off the ground, to find that she had been laying in a mixture of tears, snot, and vomit. All of which gave a similar but more foul smell than her unfinished drink. Her blonde hair was mostly dry and frizzled except for the pieces that were being dipped in her puddle of waste. A revolver lay on the ground about four feet away from her body.

She found herself hearing an unfamiliar voice.

"Rough night?" it stated.

Cheryl continued to stare in the ground. "No. This is normal. Just let me be."

"It is his birthday, isn't it?"

"Okay. Now I know you aren't real. Just another thing fucking with my head." Cheryl stood up, wiping her lips with her arm. "Even when I try to drown it all out, it comes back out anyways." No matter how crossfaded she got, she could never escape her own horror.

She looked to see a brown haired man with a pair of round glasses. He wore a pair of slacks and a green button-up shirt. Cheryl made note of the man's bland nature of dress.

"Missed your meeting?" Cheryl jokes. "It's funny. You kinda remind me of my Uncle Crawford."

"Kronos, actually." He began to start talking, but Cheryl interrupted by slamming her head back, chugging the bottle, and coughing up as she choked. "Do you think you had enough?"

“When I’m dead,” she said.

“I mean do you think you’ve had enough suffering?”

Cheryl just looked and smiled. “I couldn’t save him. It was my idea to send him to summer camp, and he died. I see his face every time I close my eyes. The meds don’t help; the doctors haven’t helped. I just constantly relive seeing him leave.” She saw his body in the news coverage; his chest remained red with stab wounds, his face remaining white. “I keep seeing what happened to him in my fucked up head.”

“You have to understand that it is not your fault. You were a child.”

Cheryl took another swig.

“Would you understand if you could see it?” Kronos rolled his left sleeve to reveal a very large silver watch. “I can make you a deal. I can take you back, but you won’t be able to change anything. You can see Sim on again, but you cannot save him. I just want you to understand.”

Cheryl stared at him.

“It would cost you though. Your time will not stop.” Kronos reveals his golden watch. “The amount of time you spend in the past will correlate to your time now. If you spend a week in the past, you will lose a week here.”

“Yes,” Cheryl answers. As Kronos began to say something, Cheryl repeated. “Yes.”

A tear hit the ground from a younger version of Cheryl. “You were always trying to make me understand. You were clear from the beginning.”

Kronos sighed. “Granted, you were completely shit-faced. I do believe that may have swayed your decision.”

“No. No it didn’t. I will admit. I didn’t think you were real until you actually sent me back, but I would have always said yes.” Cheryl sighed. “How old am I in my time?”

Kronos scratched his head. “You just recently turned 41.”

“I’m an old bitch, huh?” Cheryl chuckled at the thought of an 8-year-old girl saying that. “I think I am about ready to go.”

“You don’t want to finish the loop and visit your brother?”

“No. It’ll just make me change my mind.” Cheryl knew that she would just spiral back into her loop of repeating loops. “Honestly, I don’t want to stop. I’m just trying something new. Maybe my fucked up head could heal. It has been a long time in here, huh.”

“It has.” Kronos pulled out his gold watch, holding his thumb over it. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Cheryl looked down at her feet. “Hey, Kronos. I’m sorry it took me so long.”

“Unlike you, I have all the time in the world.” He pushed his thumb into the watch.

The room was bright, almost blinding towards Cheryl. The beeping of a heart monitor was the only thing louder than the light. As her eyes adjusted, she realized that she was in a hospital room. The wall that she was staring forward towards gave this sense of white blankness, like it hadn’t been painted yet at all. She could not find her strength to move her arms or legs. Cheryl snickered to herself, figuring that may be a

problem. Still, there was something about the aura in the room. She could not even move her head to see it, but there was something in the air that put Cheryl at ease somewhat. She never figured she would feel nostalgic to be in the present.

Cheryl found her head uncontrollably leaning towards her right until it rested on her shoulder. On the bedside table lay a tiny DVD case. It had an odd shape that Cheryl was not familiar with. It was really thin and small compared to a normal case for Cheryl. It had a red logo on the top corner of the case that read “Nintendo Switch.” The case cover had artwork very similar to one of her childhood games. The cover read: *Castlevania: Anniversary Collection*. It showed a picture of the main character with the same name as her brother, Simon.

Attached to the case was a note. It took Cheryl hours before a nurse could read it for her.

“When you finally get the strength to get up, I figured you would want this. Keep moving and pushing. Know that you are loved and thought about.” – Dad.

Jack Bond

Frog in a Car

9/16/2024 Monday

A fucking tree frog is somewhere in my car. I don't know where, but he is waiting somewhere to jump on me and cause me to crash. Best case scenario is that he dies and stinks up my car. Worst case scenario is that he jumps on me when I'm least expecting it and causes me to swerve my small silver outlander into a fucking semi-truck.

I didn't even notice the moment he jumped up on the doorframe. As soon as I opened the passenger door to set my backpack down, a tiny leafy green speck slowly blinked his black puppy eyes at me. It was like he teleported when I opened the door, or maybe he was already there somehow?

"Fuck," I spat under my breath. If his tiny ass jumped around he could easily get lost or stuck. Slowly, I set my backpack in the passenger seat, then looked around my rain-soaked gravel driveway for a stick. Just at the edge of the rocks, in my muddy, overgrown yard, there was a perfectly narrow, pencil-length twig that curved at the end like a hockey stick. Perfect for prodding a frog out of my car.

I grabbed the twig and ran back to the open door. Slowly, I set the stick in front of the frog, and lightly tapped it on the nose like I was trying to scrape out a very precise amount of butter. For whatever reason, the fucker jumped over it and further into my floorboard instead of backing away from the danger like a rational being.

It sat in the mini pond of boogery tissues, plastic sandwich bags, crumbs, and paper fast food bags that pooled in the carpet on the passenger side. Maybe he smelt the moldy apple core through the plastic bag it rotted in. I didn't want to dirty my perfect stick, but I hesitantly scooped it in front of the frog again. And again, the fucker jumped over it, this time landing just under the glovebox.

It was dangerously close to a crack leading to my car's interior. If I poked it with the stick one more time, it would just jump over it again and into the bowels of my car. If I left it, then it would probably jump in there anyways, or it would jump on me on my way to school.

My watch read 8:30. The class I TA'd for started at 10, and the drive there took an hour — a little more if I needed to stop for a bathroom break (which was very likely with my piece-of-shit stomach). When I looked back up, I swear the little fucker winked at me before disappearing behind the glovebox.

"Shit," I spat. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." I told my mom what happened just to see if she had any ideas, and she spent the next five minutes opening the glove box and poking around with me and the flashlight on my phone. The frog just straight up vanished. No amount of light or searching could find it. However, class would not be delayed for one little frog.

While driving in cruise control on the interstate, I pulled my pant legs tight and held my calves up against the bottom of my seat. If that fucker climbed up my jeans while I was driving, I was taking the whole interstate down with me. My eyes were constantly darting down to the floorboards to see if he had crawled out of his hiding spot, but I never saw him.

The professor gave the class a reading by Nietzsche about the abstract nature of language: signified, signifiers — all that jazz. While they read and discussed, I spent the class googling "how to get frog out of car," "how to lure frog out of car," "how long can tree frogs live without food or water." The answer to the last one told me that I might have to worry about this damn frog for 3-4 weeks. That's 3-4 weeks of death gripping the steering wheel and looking around my car for a pair of beady little eyes like a paranoid old man who yells on the street corner about how birds are government spies. Fantastic.

One user on reddit said that they saw the frog climb out of their hood after it had jumped behind their glovebox (there were a shocking amount of people who have had frogs jump behind the glovebox by the way). Another user said they never found the frog, but that the car never smelled, probably due to the frog drying out. At least I had no smell to worry about, but I still had the issue of him jumping on me while driving. As much as I wanted to just believe Papa Reddit's soothing bullshit, I couldn't predict what a frog would do.

I tapped my pencil repeatedly against my thumb, looking over the lesson notes for the class I was going to teach on Friday. It had only one bullet point that said "annotate a poem/song in class with them (write on board to show the process)." The poems and songs I considered were:

1. "Sonnet 18" by Shakespeare

2. “Grabbling in Yokna Bottom” by James Seay
3. “The Bluebird Cafe” by Jo McDougall
4. “Soldier’s Poem” by Muse
5. “Sober” by Tool
6. “Jesus He Knows Me” by Genesis
7. “Sun Killer” by Spiritbox

Over half of them were marked out. This was a first-year comp class, after all. Shakespeare was too difficult, Seay’s and Genesis’ were too long, Tool was too abstract, Muse was too short. That left the McDougall poem or the Spiritbox song. Spiritbox was what I leaned towards, but McDougall would fit on the board better — even if I wasn’t nearly as deeply invested in it.

Who was I kidding though? What would a bunch of first-year comp students, most of which were probably stem majors, get out of analyzing a poem? Sure, the point was to teach annotation skills, but was doing that through a poem effective if most of them were going to be reading more hard science in their futures anyways? Would they miss the point? Was it even applicable to them in the first place? Was I a bad teacher?

I set my notebook down and tilted my head back, staring up at the fluorescent troffer lights in the library ceiling. What was I doing accepting this position? I had no idea how to teach — especially students that were about the same age as me.

My apple watch vibrated, telling me that it was time to close the notebook and get in the writing center, another place I had no right being in. Regardless, I put the notebook up and pushed through the doors.

Sitting at the middle-most desk was a noticeably thin student who was constantly adjusting his glasses, eyes glued to his phone. His leg bounced up and down like he was trying to maximize the output of a sewing machine or die trying. One of the campus' rentable electric scooters was propped against the table next to him.

“Have you been helped yet?” I asked him.

He didn't look up from his phone, but replied breathlessly “Not yet... I have an appointment with... Ben?” He spoke as if he had just got done running a marathon.

“That's me. I can get you over here,” I said, leading him to an empty desk and pulling my laptop out of my bag. “So, how are you doing today?”

“...Good.” He nodded, trying to bore a hole in the laminated wooden tabletop with his forefinger.

When he requested the appointment, he put on the session agenda that he wanted help with an outline, but before we could move on, I needed to clear that up and get more details. “Glad to hear it. And what are we working on today?”

He didn't reply — didn't even look at me — as he opened his laptop and started clicking through programs. All the while his finger kept boring away at the desk, and his leg bounced like a frog on crack. I looked to the other two tutors in the center, but they were busy with students of their own. My eyes fell back on the student's laptop, watching as he pulled up a word document and the school's website for submitting homework. Silently, he turned the laptop towards me and looked away, his brows furrowed.

I read the assignment sheet briefly, but I still needed to know what he understood about the assignment. “Okay,” I said. “So what can you tell me about this assignment?”

He said nothing — didn’t even flinch. Instead, he steadied his gaze on something far away. I waited silently. Maybe he needed time to collect his thoughts. Maybe he needed to search for the right words to explain his understanding of it.

About fifteen excruciating seconds later, I piped up “From what I understand, you have to give a speech on a problem that interests you, and you have chosen... global warming and how the extreme weather it causes affects animals?”

Refusing to look at me at this point, he simply nodded, chewing his nails like a starving frog chews flies.

“Ok,” I said, nodding. His outline had a title, section headers, and maybe one or two lines of information beneath the headers. “And I assume you want help with brainstorming some ideas right?”

He nodded.

“Got it,” I said. “So what can you tell me about global warming and weather? Like, what specifically is the relationship there?”

He took a deep, shaky breath and, still refusing to look at me, started scrolling through his outline as he talked about his main points. “So... so... uh...” He gulped, his throat bulging like a croaking frog. “So, I mainly want to talk about how — how the weather — how climate change causes — is causing severe weather storms.”

“Ok, but how is it causing severe storms?” He gulped again, but I sat in silence long enough to know he didn’t have an answer. I continued “Because I know that climate change

can and does cause severe weather, but not everybody does. In fact, that's a pretty hot topic in climate change deniers: the idea that 'oh it's cold outside, so global warming isn't a problem' is a very real line of thought. And so, I think you'll have to explain that in your speech. Because you want to assume that your audience knows nothing. It may seem obvious to you, but a lot of writing — or in this case speech-giving — is essentially explaining the obvious.”

He typed on his outline: *prove global warming is real*. Perhaps I had given him too much work to do. Proving global warming was real was an essay in and of itself.

His finger kept bouncing on the desk like a bullfrog trying to jump out of a net, so I reached into my backpack and pulled out the fidget toy I keep on me. Nothing fancy, just two rings connected together with some rubber. I'm not really sure what to call it. “Hey, if you want, I got this fidget... thing. It's small, but it usually helps me focus.”

He pulled a fidget spinner out of his backpack and stared at his screen, spinning the toy like a water wheel in a hurricane, throwing frogs around everywhere. I dragged myself, internally crying and kicking and screaming, through the rest of the 45 minute session.

Later that evening, when I got to my car, the first thing I did was check for the frog. He wasn't on the roof, the floorboards, or the seats. I didn't check as thoroughly as I should've; all I wanted to do was get home, microwave the spaghetti I made last night, then maybe have a beer or two until I forgot about the day and went to sleep.

As I drove, I listened to Jack Black's cover of “Baby One More Time.” If the frog was still there, he probably wasn't having it, as loud as it was. My hand reached for the knob to

turn it down, but stopped halfway. He was an intruder in my domain, a threat. Who cares if he has to deal with a loud, scary noise? I have to deal with the anxiety of a frog hiding in my fucking car waiting to make me crash and die. I put the car on cruise control and flushed the back of my calves against the seat.

What if the frog had crawled out during the day and eaten the crumbs in the bottom of my car, or what if he had starved to death, his tiny little body lying lifeless somewhere in the engine? Maybe he had gotten into a fan or a really hot piece of machinery he wasn't supposed to touch. Maybe he got into the coolant somehow and was now floating around in the poison wondering where everything went wrong.

I didn't want a dead frog in my car any more than a live one, so I pushed the images out of my head. What likely happened was that he found a way out through the myriad cracks or pipes or whatever the fuck a car's internal structure allows. He probably hopped out of the exhaust pipe and gulped down the refreshing, misty air after being cooped and crammed up for so long.

Was it difficult trying to navigate the alien labyrinth of metal? Did the strange, loud sounds reverberating through the walls, through his tiny heart, make it scarier and more challenging?

I turned the music down and snuck a glance at the passenger seat. Still no frog. I thought about him crawling up my pants again, but realized that my legs were unconsciously already relaxed. My grip on the steering wheel was loose, and I was almost home as well. After all, what damage could a little tree frog really do if he jumped on my legs?

If he was still there, maybe he would've jumped on the top of my cap, and we could've listened to frog music (whatever that sounds like). Or maybe I could've pulled over on the side of the road to set him in the grass. If he had escaped, then maybe he was relieved to be back in the petrichor and dew he grew up in.

9/20/2024 Friday

Yesterday was a headache and a half. At least up until I decided to skip class. Until that point (around 4 p.m.), I had made phone call after phone call trying to get my W2 forms – you know, the forms I needed to pay my taxes waaaay back in April that nobody had fucking given me still. After that, I studied generative AI for my tutoring work, then I practiced what I would say to the students when I introduced my lesson. By the way, I still don't know what I'm doing leading that, but fuck it, we ball. You think the frog knew what my car was like before jumping into its interior? Fuck no. He just dived right in.

I ended up emailing my professor that I was sick to my stomach and skipped class so I could have some resemblance of a break. I still had to read Sense and Sensibility for class tomorrow, but that was nothing compared to driving out at 5:30 at night and not getting home until 9:00 just to have to wake up at the ass crack of dawn the next day and immediately leave the house so I wouldn't be late.

Maybe if I had gone, I would have found the frog and gotten him out of my car. Instead, I found him this morning. As I opened my passenger side door to set my backpack

down, there he was on the floorboards, sitting perfectly still on top of a faded parking brochure for the college. He was much thinner and darker than I remembered him. I already knew what happened, but I slowly opened the glovebox anyway just to make sure he wouldn't move.

I held up a finger to him, my eyes trained on the motionless frog. I pulled on one of the gloves from the glovebox and carefully grabbed hold of the brochure the frog sat on. As it came closer to my eyes, I noticed the strands of loose hair glued to its dried-out body.

My problem was gone. No more tree frog to terrorize my commutes. No more passenger to listen to me sing along to Tenacious D.

This was my fault. If I hadn't skipped class, he might have gotten the help he needed. Of course there was no way he would crawl out towards a world of loud, confusing noise and scary sticks that poked him. And of course he wouldn't survive in an SUV with no food and intense summer heat for 3 days. I should've tried harder to lead him to safety.

The only thing I could do was hope that I was wrong. I carried the frog to our pebbled flowerbed, brochure and all, and turned on the water faucet. The water quickly pooled underneath him, enough to cover his lower half. I had seen pictures and videos of people re-hydrating frogs online. Despite the summer heat, the lack of food, and the stress of an unfamiliar environment, I hoped that he was somehow able to survive it all. I hoped that a little bit of water was all he needed as I left for school to teach my lesson.

The whole ride over I tried my hardest to ignore the sweat dripping down my forehead and threatening to soak my shirt. The steering wheel fought against my crushing grip, and the

air conditioner was cold enough to freeze Antarctica. Cold air gave me something to focus on other than the anxious aches in my chest, throat, arms, etc. E-Dubble's "Miracle" blazed over the speakers. I forced myself to sing along — to really put my heart into it. "Some days you gotta feel your oats / And when the self esteem's low, really gloat."

Maybe if I had shown the frog this instead of heavy metal or rock, he would have what he needed to navigate his way out of the stressful amalgamation of metal he had gotten himself into.

I don't know what I was so worried about. They liked my earlier lesson on dialogue, and my mentor said that I did well on that too. I even had a student after class tell me he wanted to take more English classes and "do more stuff like this." The cherry on top was my mentor calling my decisions "brilliant." I couldn't wait to tell the frog when he re-hydrated.

9/21/2024 Saturday

The sun shined brightly, the still air slept in, and the frog was indisputably dead. He was still sitting on the now soggy brochure, surrounded by slugs and missing an eye. The water did nothing to return him to form either; he was still thin as bone, and his color was somehow even darker. He was no longer a frog, just a husk sitting in water.

I grabbed the shovel, dug a small hole in my front yard, and put the frog in it. If I didn't need to be in class, I might

have even stood there in silence, but it was 8:30. I needed to leave. I wish I had made more time to help a scared and confused little frog, but I had work to do, and I was worried about drying myself out.

Empty



Spring Warning



The World Under a Tree



Katelyn Manning

Heart of A Lion



Mason Sherman

To Light Upon His Countenance

“David Rivers? We’re ready for you now.”

A suit looked absently down at his clipboard, reading more names and time slots for the other sorry souls in the room. He was a clean man, everything about him was obviously obsessed over to the most minute detail. His face was clean shaven, and he wore a black pair of wide-rimmed frames. His eyebrows were exactly congruent, and his well maintained black hair contrasted sharply against his pale, fair skin.

A shorter man in a recently pressed pair of slacks and a button-down stood up and followed him. He was led into a small, dingy room that seemed more akin to a dungeon than an office. The cinder block walls were beige, and the paint was chipping to tease a white primer coat. A half-out light fixture was crudely uncentered on the ceiling, hanging a little, and the bulbs showered a hot and sickly yellow on generations of bugs caught in the cover.

The glare cast a long shadow behind the interviewee as he sat down, with the awkward angle of the fixture casting a blinding light in the corner of his eye. A widened man sat at the desk, his sides spilling over his chair arms like boiling water in a pot. He looked more of a bulldog than a man, or perhaps a hog, with cheeks that puffed out under his grayed beard. His eyes were dark, and always looked down. His nose was sharper than most, but was still too wide to be a beak.

The suit with the board shut the door as quickly as he opened it upon his exit from the room. The shorter man extended his hand to shake the employer's slab.

"Dave Rivers, sir."

"Ken Miles. Thanks for coming in."

"Thank you fo--"

"What are your biggest strengths, Dave?"

"Well, sir, I'm a fast learner--"

"That's good. What's with the gap in your résumé?"

"That's when I was in rehab, sir."

"Rehab?"

"Yessir. I just got out last--"

"Congrats, son. Lucky for you, I got a heart of gold. Job's yours. Be here at five tomorrow morning. Just wear a decent shirt and you can pick up your apron when you come in. You'll be stocking shelves, and you get paid every two weeks. Sound good?"

"Thank you, Mr. Miles. I promise you won't regret it."

He extended his hand to the slab once more and took his leave. It was a long commute to his brother's flat. A ten minute walk down crowded sidewalks to the bus stop, a thirty minute bus ride in silence occasionally broken by the squeaking of breaks that desperately needed to be replaced on the #9, another twenty minute trek past brick complexes until he got to the concrete building next to the park, and then a four-story stair climb until he could fiddle with his keys to unlock the door with a sticky lock that needed a few shakes to work.

"Roger, I got it."

The door clicked behind David as he shut it.

“You got a job?” A tall, well-built man sat on the couch, sunk deep within the aged cushions. He had the same dark hair and large nose as Dave, but lacked the evidence of previous breakings that his brother’s had. His jaw was strong, and he bore a chin that squared off at the edges of his face. His eyes, however, betrayed the solemn rigidity of his demeanor with soft, brown irises. He lounged in a white t-shirt and jeans, and looked over his shoulder when Dave spoke.

“At the Smith’s on Third and Johnson.”

“Well, welcome back to society, little brother. How does it feel?”

He paused for a moment.

“I don’t know, exactly. I should be on cloud nine, but... but all I know is that one of these days, I’ll get my own place, and I can have you and Sydney over for dinner instead of you guys having to feed your mutt.”

“I think I’ll take my chances.”

“Come on. I took a cooking class, back in Nashville.”

He grabbed a bottle of water from the pantry and took a sip, grimacing as it went down.

“Still hate it?”

“Not as much.” He took another drink.

“Speaking of food, what’s Syd making for supper?”

Roger shrugged. “She’ll be home in a bit. You’ll have to ask her when she comes in.”

Dave settled in the corner of the couch opposite his brother’s after he untucked his one good shirt. It would have

to be washed and pressed again before the morning, he thought, but that could be done later. Eventually, a slender woman with lengthy brown hair backed in the door, bearing a paper bag full of groceries on her left arm like a mother would a child. The giant sack dwarfed her thin, fair frame, and contrasted sharply against the backdrop of her long, blonde hair. Her face matched her frame, and came to a soft point. Freckles peppered her cheeks and nose, and she shared the same brown eyes as her husband.

“Sydney, let me help you with that.” Dave got up and grabbed the groceries from the crook of her arm as she walked in.

“You’re sweet, Dave. Unlike *somebody*. Maybe I married the wrong brother, after all.”

Roger looked back over the sofa. “Hey, I am busy with a really important duty right now. If I get up, the couch may just walk away. Besides, I’m letting you be a strong, independent woman.”

Syd rolled her eyes as she walked over and pecked her husband’s cheek. “You’re worthless.”

“I’ve been saying that for thirty years!” Dave called from the kitchen counters as he unpacked the overburdened bag. “Syd, you look tired. Want me to cook tonight?”

Sydney quickly glanced down Rog, who studied a 30 for 30 as if it was Gospel. “He said he took a class back in Nashville,” he mumbled, absentmindedly.

She looked back towards the kitchen, her eyes widened. “Oh, no, Dave, you really don’t have to do that. You must be tired from job searching all day and from interviews... that

and I'd rather not die from food poisoning," she added on under her breath.

"I insist. It's the least I could do since you two are letting me crash here."

"Oh... thank you, Dave." She crossed herself when he turned away to the cabinets. Rog nudged her from the couch.

"Of course."

Forty minutes later, the table was set, and three plates of pasta and red sauce appeared before the trio.

"I had to fix up the sauce on the fly. We were out of a few seasonings, but it's edible," said David while scooting his chair closer to the table.

The couple shared a quick, sideways glance, squeezed their intertwined hands under the table, and took a nervous bite. They both looked back up at each other, at their plate, and then at him.

"Dave, this is actually good."

Roger took another fork full. "Yeah, for real. You learned this in a class?"

"Yeah, I needed something to fill my time when I was in rehab so I wouldn't dwell too much on... you know."

His family nodded as they ate. They were eating fast, as if they were afraid it would suddenly turn bad if they gave it the chance.

"Here I was thinking that this was going to be like when you made Thanksgiving dinner a few years ago all over again."

Syd nudged Rog hard at the comment.

“What? You were thinking it too!”

She blushed. “Anyways, how did the job search go?”

“I got a job at Smith’s.”

“You did? That’s great!” She beamed and clapped her hands together.

“Thank you, Syd. See, Rog? That’s how you congratulate someone on getting a job.”

Roger shrunk at his wife’s glare. “I congratulated him when he told me!”

Dave smiled softly and got up. “Well, I’m full, and I gotta do some laundry before I go to bed. If you put your dishes in the sink, I’ll clean them when I get the washer started.”

He left the table before they could protest and began his chores for the night. Whenever he found himself to be finished, he went to shower and to bed. He woke the next morning to a thirty-something-year-old alarm clock blaring at 4:00 AM. Crawling out of bed, he got dressed and began the commute back to the corner of Third and Johnson.

His trainer was an old man, his hands stiff from arthritis. He was a nice enough man, but his left leg seemed to pain him with each step. He only worked part time, so he soon left Dave to stock the store after about three hours. It was easy enough work — match the bar codes, put it on the shelf, pull stuff from the back to the front, try not to freeze to death in the ice cream fridge, and repeat. Simple, consistent, and paying — all that a man needs.

“Excuse me, sir, but do you know where the canned soup is?”

“Aisle three, at the very end. Can’t miss it,” he said, not looking up from his cans of corn.

“Thank you, sir.” The voice paused. “David?”

Dave quickly looked up. A short woman with shoulder-length auburn hair stood over him, her mouth agape. Her body blocked the overhead light that hung above them, plunging his crouched form in a soft shade. He dropped the can in his hand.

“Brandi?”

He stood up and took a step back, looking at the woman to confirm his sight. He saw her now. Her auburn hair was curled just a little, just enough to still be controlled, and she wore just enough makeup to highlight her features instead of covering them up. She had green eyes that showed blue in just the right lighting. In the pale white lights of the store, they were sapphires.

She closed her mouth and looked down, avoiding eye contact. “I heard from Syd that you were out of rehab, but I didn’t know you were working in this part of town. Are you staying somewhere close?”

“I’m living with her and Rog, actually.”

She quickly looked up, her eyes a little wider.

“That’s almost an hour if you walk!” She didn’t bother asking if he was driving. They both knew he had no license.

“Yeah, well, work is work. I needed a job.”

Her mouth went back to the floor before she caught herself in her rudeness. She blushed a little.

“What are you doing over here, anyways? You never come back to this part of town,” he said, adjusting his collar a little.

“I just needed something for dinner, and this was the closest store to where I go to church — ”

“You went to church?” It was Sunday, now that he thought about it.

“I started going a month or so after we div — ... split up.”

Her eyes darted to him, and then down as her face subtly flushed.

“You cut your hair.”

“You stopped shaving.”

“Yeah, well, you know.”

“Yeah.” She paused and averted her gaze. Her head perked up after a moment. “David... would you want to get coffee tomorrow? It’s been a while.”

“You hate coffee.”

“Do you want to go or not?”

“I —” He hesitated. “Yes.”

“Okay. See you then. Jackie’s on 6th Street. 6 P.M, since I get off at five. Don’t be late.” She adjusted her purse and started to walk away while he briefly paused and went back to his cans of corn. She stopped at the end of the aisle and turned back around.

“David?”

“Yeah, Brandi?”

“I’m glad to see you... better. Sober. Working. You know what I mean.”

“Me, too, Brandi. Me, too.”

It was a cold walk home that evening. The light of the TV flashed in the window that marked Rog and Syd's apartment. The buzz of lights and air vents created a loud silence that was more than enough to close the mind. Dave opened the door quietly and went in without a word.

The only thing that divided the kitchen from the living room was the sofa, on which Syd laid against her husband with her head on his shoulder. Rog had his left arm draped over her. The living room was dark and quiet, except for the meaningless noise and strobos of the television. The lights of the kitchen did not reach them, and the television created a long shadow of their heads to loom to where Dave stood. He couldn't help but watch them for a moment, gazing at an image he had not felt in a long time. He wasn't entirely sure if either of them was awake or asleep, until someone sniffled. A feeling of unsureness crept up in the pits of his stomach.

"I saw her today."

Roger looked back.

"Who?"

"Brandi."

Sydney sat up and patted her husband's thigh and stood. "I'll leave you two to talk."

Dave thought he saw the hints of a smirk at the edges of her mouth when she passed by to their bedroom.

The light of the TV splashed across Roger's face as he looked on at the prizefight on the screen. David stood behind him, behind the couch he sat on, as his brother looked on with a stare that held back a million thoughts. The silence here was louder than the hall, or anywhere on the walk

home. The noises and lights of a city can be so deafening that it forces a man to drown out everything with the sound of the air in his own ears. Even then, even amidst the screams of a man's mind, he can't think. The TV was no different, except that the room was smaller, and that it was the only thing providing the noise.

"Where did you see her?"

"Work."

"She living in Parkview now?"

"No. She was at church with a friend in the area."

"Church?"

"That's what I said."

The silence covered them both again for a moment. There was some commercial playing on the set about a new, fancy mop that had a machine-washable head.

"How was she?"

"She..." his voice caught. On what, he was unsure. "She seemed... well."

"That's good."

"She wants me to get coffee with her tomorrow. To catch up."

"Are you?"

Dave hesitated. "Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"I already told her I'd be there — "

"That's not what I asked." Roger turned his head back a little, giving his brother a look that saw right through him.

"Are you sure?"

“I...” he sighed, and walked to the chair that sat at an angle beside the couch. Dave sat down, his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands, and took a long, long breath before clasping his hands on his knees and looking down.

“When she left... when I pushed her away, I was... a bad man. I was someone else. And I’ve spent the last three years doing what I could, what I needed to do, to be someone else — to be better. For her. For you. For Syd. All of us. Every night I spent in rehab, I spent dreaming of her. Every meeting, every fight with my mind, every therapy session, I did it for her, so that I could be the man she fell in love with. And, and I saw her, and... Rog, I didn’t recognize her. My own... I didn’t recognize her.” Tears stood back behind his eyes, as if they were unsure if they had permission to fall or not.

His brother looked on in silence, patiently taking in every word. The ambience of the match crept back in, sealing them both into their thoughts. Roger took a breath before he spoke.

“You know, Dave, life is nothing but a fight. It’s all a big fight, between you and the world. Sometimes, it’s even just you and yourself. That’s the hard match no one ever talks about — the one where you’re your own opponent, where you know your every move, trick and when each blow is gonna land... and a lot of people can’t deal with that. They take a first southpaw that gets dealt out and they go down in the first round. And so, they quit. They get knocked out, wheeled out, carried out, sometimes even walk out, and they retire from the ring. They go and take up hobbies or whatever, and it never gives them any real meaning or value because as soon as it’s over, it’s over. There’s no success,

because they're still looking for some semblance of joy while living in the shadow of that one match that they told themselves that there was no point in going back to. They get flabby. They get out of shape. And eventually, they die.

“But then there’s the people that take that hook to the jaw or to the nose and feel something crack or break or whatever and kiss the ground. But they get up. They get up and they get creative, doing stuff they would never do, because that’s the only way to beat the guy that knows everything you can and will do — you gotta change. Change is the way to beat yourself. And, so, you do something different, and you start chipping away at the other guy. He learns if you make a habit, so you gotta keep him on his toes. But you wear him down. And eventually... well, eventually you win.

“And the ref comes over. And he hoists your arm. And all the people in the crowd that lost the kind of match you’re winning are all saying, ‘Wow, I just wish... I just *wish* I could be that guy.’ But there’s no joy for you in that, because you just feel bad for them. So you look down, and you see a guy you don’t recognize on the ground, because that’s not you anymore. That’s somebody else.” His voice got quiet. “That’s real joy, Dave.”

“I had real joy, Rog.” He slowly looked up at his brother. “But I threw her away for something that never lasted for more than a night at a time. And now that she’s back... I don’t recognize her. She won her fight.”

Roger looked up. “You look different these days, you know, Dave?”

Jackie's on 6th street was a fine bistro. The barista that took Dave's order seemed like a sweet girl, and she sounded like she truly meant the customary "have a good day" she served as she handed him his receipt. Her eyes were a light green, and her hair was black and tied behind her. Her face was round, and she had a beauty mark on her left cheek.

The lights didn't do much except for in the back, as the large storefront windows allowed the sun to bask the beige walls in radiance, and the rich smell of ground coffee beans was enough to warm a soul. The sun hung at the perfect angle to not blind Dave, and it created just a glimpse of shadow on the wall behind him. He was early, a little too early. Rehab taught punctuality well.

She came to his table not long after he sat down, her coffee in hand.

"You walked right past my table," she said as she gave a light smile, sliding into the seat across from him and sitting her coffee down.

"I did?"

"Yeah, you did. I was right by the door. You looked right at me, too. You're not avoiding me, are you?" There was a soft laugh under her words.

"What? No, sorry, I promise I wasn't avoiding you — wait, you were here before me?"

She nodded, taking a sip of her coffee.

"Wow. Is it snowing in Africa right now?"

She chortled. "Actually, there's great skiing in Morocco, from what I hear."

“I’ll believe that when I see it.”

She pulled out her phone and searched for hard evidence before handing him her phone with a smug look. “Told you.”

He scrolled through in disbelief and handed back her phone. “Who knew there was more than desert?”

She smiled and took another sip.

“So, how have you been? It’s been a while.”

“Well, actually. I’ve been doing well. I’ve been making some pretty big changes, and... I think they’re doing good for me. I started a new job in Ridgefield, started going to church with a friend from work, finally gave in to modern America’s true pastime,” she said, shaking her cup before sipping and looking down at the table. “And that’s about it.”

“Wow. Those are... those are some pretty big changes.”

“Yeah, well... what about you?”

“I’m... I’m okay. I got out of rehab, found a job, which you already know that, but, other than that... I took a cooking class.”

“A cooking class?”

“Yeah. While I was in rehab.”

“Is Morocco on fire?”

“Probably, yeah.”

They both laughed, and the silence of the coffee shop settled back between them. She was the first to break it.

“So how have you been?”

“I just told you.”

“You told me what you’ve been doing, not how you were, and ‘okay’ isn’t much of an answer.”

He sighed and looked at his coffee. The latte art was starting to get mixed in with the rest of the cup.

“David, how are you?” Her voice held no demand, rather only a plea.

Dave looked up, slowly, and opened his mouth hesitantly. “Brandi, I... When you go through rehab, you have a lot of time to think. And to reflect. And to work. And I’ve been thinking, lately, about everything. About us. About how it all went down. About me. And about you.”

She sipped and nodded. “I’ve thought a lot about you, too.”

“Brandi, I never got the chance to say it, but... I’m sorry. I’m so sorry for all that I did, for all that I was, for hurting you and lying to you over and over and over, for pushing you away when all that you tried to do was help me. I’m sorry.”

Her emerald eyes gazed softly, no, sadly, back into his, reading his soul. “I know. I... I know. And I forgive you.”

Her words slammed into him like a truck.

“You... you do?”

“I do.”

“But... why?”

She took a deep breath and let it out to give herself enough time to gather her thoughts.

“David, when I left you... I was hurting in ways I never knew or thought possible. It... *gnawed* at me from the inside, and the longer I held on to the — the hatred that I had for you, the worse it got. I couldn’t live like that. Whenever I looked in the mirror, I saw it. I saw your

reflection in my eyes. So, I let go. I made changes, and I let go.”

Dave fought back his own tears and laughed softly at his own state. “You know, whenever I saw you yesterday at first, I couldn’t believe it was you. I didn’t recognize your voice. You... those changes really are working well for you. I’m glad I didn’t recognize you at first.”

She laughed, softly, too. “I can’t believe I didn’t recognize you, either. And I’m glad, too.” She paused. “You’re a good man now, David Rivers. I’m so proud of you.”

He pressed his lips together to fight his eyes, causing his mustache to push down, and moved his fist to cover his mouth.

“I did it for you, Brandi. I want you to know that. I’m not asking for a second chance. I just... I did it for you,” he said as he looked up, meeting her eyes with his. “I wanted to be better for you. And now... you’re not her anymore.”

“And you’re not him anymore.”

They finished their coffee together, going back and forth as old friends would, but as new friends. When they finished, they stood, and he opened the door for her to go outside. They said their goodbyes and parted ways. She walked eastward, the wind to her back, softly brushing through her hair, and he walked westward, into the soft evening sky that was boldly painted in sweeping oranges and pinks behind white and grey streaks. The sun lit upon his countenance with a warm glow and casted a long shade behind him that grew farther with each passing moment.

Olivia Kakarlamudi

A Moment for Myself

On the most calming morning, as the sun began to rise, a young woman hurriedly flopped out of bed, barely noticing the beauty surrounding her. The birds chirping outside went unheard, drowned out by the music blaring through her headphones. She rushed through her morning routine, focusing solely on the next task on her list. Breakfast was a quick grab of whatever was available; she barely savored the flavors or appreciated the efforts it took to prepare it.

Her mind buzzed with worry as she sprinted from her apartment to college. Her phone rang with calls from parents and friends, each bringing a mixture of scoldings and praises. She barely absorbed their words, lost in thoughts about homework, financial pressures, and looming deadlines. With earbuds in, she shuffled along the path, her eyes staring straight ahead, oblivious to the vibrant world around her.

At college, she buried herself in her studies. The stress mounted like a weight on her shoulders, each assignment and thought piercing deeper into her mind. Rarely did she take a moment to breathe, let alone appreciate the little joys in life. Friends often offered support, but she brushed them off, convinced that she needed to be perfect — perfect in grades, perfect in friendships, perfect in every facet of life.

Despite dreaming of being peaceful and free, she had become a prisoner of her own making, caged by anxiety and self-doubt. Once carefree, she now struggled to find her

footing, constantly second-guessing herself and her abilities. Nights turned restless as she tossed and turned in bed, often relying on medications just to fall asleep. The spark of youthful dreams seemed dimmed, buried under layers of stress.

One late afternoon, feeling particularly weighed down after a long day of classes, she paused on her walk home. For the first time in a long time, she looked around. The sun was setting, casting a golden hue over everything. The trees swayed gently in the breeze, and the colors around her were vibrant and alive. As she stood there, a realization washed over her. She was missing this beautiful world — missing the peace that could be found in fleeting moments.

Reflecting on life, she understood that the constant rush had turned existence into a blur of stress and disappointment. One bad day stretched into another, forming a cycle of anxiety that felt impossible to break. She thought, “If I continue like this, what will I have to show for my life? Will I look back and see the beauty that once surrounded me, or will it all fade into a memory of stress?”

At that moment, she decided it was time for a change. Life was too precious to waste on negativity and self-imposed pressure. She wanted to feel appreciated and happy again. This didn’t mean avoiding responsibility; it was about finding joy in small moments — the laughter of friends, the simple pleasure of a warm meal, or the warmth of the sun on her face.

With a newfound sense of resolve, she began making small changes. She took breaks during study sessions, stepping outside to soak up the sun and listen to the birds. She started keeping a journal, writing down things she was

grateful for each day. Small accomplishments began to feel significant again. Learning to breathe — deep, fulfilling breaths — reminded her of her worth and potential. She reached out to friends more frequently, allowing herself to be vulnerable and accepting help when needed. Conversations that once felt burdensome became sources of joy and connection.

As weeks turned into months, she gradually reclaimed her peace and happiness. Perfection wasn't about flawless grades or constant productivity; it was about being present, embracing imperfections, and cherishing the journey. In that process, she learned to fly. With each passing day, she grew stronger and more resilient. The world around her became vivid and beautiful again, filled with opportunities and hope. She understood life's challenges were just part of the adventure, and she could rise above them with grace and gratitude.

Empowered and renewed, she promised herself to cherish each moment — to appreciate little things and to remember that she was, above all, a free soul capable of learning, growing, and thriving in this magnificent world.

Sandra Rose

To My Love (Submission from “Love Letters at Humanities” Tributary Event)

I wouldn't say my life was like dry hay before you, but it has become complete ever since you entered it.

I went from being a girl who never focused on her appearance to someone who makes sure she is presentable all day. I transformed from a person who was irritable about love and romance to someone who eagerly waits just to see you for a few minutes.

I changed from being very territorial and harsh to having a “whatever works” attitude. I used to be quiet, but now I find myself talking non-stop. I thought I could survive alone, but I can't even imagine how a day would go by without you on my mind. You've helped me discover myself and feel confident in my own skin. I never knew what I did to deserve you, but now that I have you, I will never forget you.

I may still struggle to express my feelings fully, but I would take a bullet for you if it came to that. You are my peace amid the chaos and the warmth that melts away my worries. Every moment spent with you serves as a gentle reminder that love isn't just about grand gestures but rather the quiet, reassuring presence of someone who truly cares. Your kindness, your laughter, and even the way you say my name make my heart feel lighter, as if I was always meant to find you.

No matter what life throws our way, I want you to know that my heart is yours. You are the best part of my days, the reason behind my happiest smiles, and the love I never knew I needed. I will cherish you always, not just in the beautiful moments but even in the ordinary ones, because with you, even the simplest things feel extraordinary.

Tanner Kenley

He

As I emerge through the frame
So does He emerge,
Shedding me, like a serpent
Does its worn husk,
And walking out into reality.

He trots among the masses,
Eyes down, ears distracted,
A shadow in sheep's clothing,
Stuffing his former self deep
Into the pocket of his jeans.

He sits idly by,
A diffident presence
In the back of every class,
Wary of any sticky fingers
Searching for loose change.

He assumes a separate identity
For each face he crosses.
An actor scrounging for expressions

To fit the volatile drama
That is rudimentary human interaction.

His one-man act,
An unintentional calumny
Of the trapped persona,
Is showing on the world's stage
Every day from nine to five.

After the quotidian performance
Has closed curtain,
And He slams the stage door behind him,
He throws me onto my bed
Along with my keys and some chapstick.

I rest my head easy now,
Knowing he doesn't truly exist.
Though, if he is the one
Out there, being perceived,
Maybe it is me who doesn't.

I, The Writer

What words have spurned my nerves more
than what is your plan?

I, the Writer, will form worlds
with my plain right hand.

I, the Writer, will conjure
light in the night, and
my letters will rip and roar
through the minds of man.

I, the Writer, will travel
oceans and blue skies.

I, the Writer, will unravel
mysteries that lie
beneath the sand and gravel
of human design.

I, the Writer, will give a voice
to those who can't speak.

I, the Writer, will hoist,
On a sunlit peak,
Humanity's colors, and rejoice
In Earth's wondrous physique!

I, the Writer, have no plan,

I, the Writer, have dreams.

That's wonderful! But how are you going to make money?

The Hopeless Poet

I sat upon the fallen oak
And listened to him prate
A cold wind came and blew his cloak
The hour was growing late

It has been days, weeks, my memory fails
But I must have misplaced it
I stumble, falter, and stump my words
Oh! what warm wind whisked you away?

The sun had crept behind the trees
The meadow shaded gray
He shuttered in the sunset breeze
And then began to pray

O father! My God! Whence my gift came,
There it rests, alone once more
Prithee, return to me its blessing
So I may spin tales like before...

His crown bent down, and tears he shed
As dusk swept 'cross the sky
His knees to earth and hands to head
He bared his teeth and cried

O author of earth and heaven!
Who stole that sweet boon from me?
'Twas one of a heartless wench, I know,
I was too blind to see!

He stood and wiped away his eyes
The dusk had turned to dark
His gaze then lifted to the wise
And weeping willow's bark

O somber wood what ails thee so?
What malign force plagues thy form?
Why doest thou branches droop so low?
Who, or what, doest thou have to mourn?

Beyond the yellow grass, he strode
Beneath the willow tree,
Above, the waves of emerald flowed
And shared his final plea

O King of oceans, sand, and soil!
Or any that will listen,
My wrists are wrapped, my skill is spoiled
Unchain me from this prison!

The silence of the freezing eve

Was ringing through the air
 He hung his head and turned to leave,
 The Poet of Despair

But then, a change, a blazing streak
 That burned across the black
 His eyes went wide, the red mystique
 Set a flame upon his back

The ember of my soul ignites
 My prayers were answered true!
 When stars have fought and won the night
 The sun will rise anew!

Why must the artist suffer so?

Why must the artist suffer so?
 Does greatness require it of him?
 To that, I say we do not know.

Did poor and sorrowful van Gogh
 Ask, when life tore ear from limb,
 Why must the artist suffer so?

Was the poison bottle of Thomas' woe

The fuel for such inspired hymns?
To that, I say we do not know.

What of the pained and puzzled Poe?
Did he question when dark hours grew grim,
Why must the artist suffer so?

And the shattered figures of Picasso,
Are they echoes of the grief within?
To that, I say we do not know.

If I overcome this mighty plateau
Of pain, will the sting of my words wither thin?
Is that why the artist must suffer so?
To that, I say, we cannot know.

Winston Busselle

A Man not Worth a Hundred Words

“I’m not sure you’re understanding what I’m saying,” sighed Laura through her taught feigned smile, her face beginning to hurt from pretending to stay positive.

“I’m afraid I understand you fine,” Daniel laughed across the corporate suite, his pubesive eyes dancing across Laura's body. “But unfortunately I'm not seeing enough evidence.”

Laura couldn't believe her ears. She felt boiling frustration begin to surface her skin. “Thank you for your consideration sir,” she grimaced, her smile unmoved.

“Of course, let’s discuss alternatives sometime soon,” his old-money smirk approving of his professional seduction.

“I’d love that,” deadpanned Laura, knowing she’d rather die.

Amateur Poet

Roses are Red

Violets are Blue

Roses come in many colors

Violets are literally Violet

Roses have thorns that cut your hand
Who has even seen a real Violet?
...sigh...

The Plagiarist

I am no poet.
For poetry is dead.
I am merely an echo,
of words been said.
I am the character of stories,
trying to write in vain.
Like Huckleberry Finn,
hoping to become Mark Twain

The Testimony of Wolves

Two wolves run in a forest.
One chases me while I chase the other.
The wolf in pursuit breathes heavily as it follows.
Desperation fills His eyes begging me to stop running.
His once beautiful white fur is now haggard and scarred.
His stride is both war-beaten and determined.
There is blood that flows from His side as He endures the

sin of my riotous journey.

Despite my persistence to flee, the wolf continues to chase
me.

He howls in agony for me to turn away.

He offers me haven from the dark woods around me.

He pleads for my life. But I refuse to submit.

I am the master of my own path.

I will not serve another.

Despite my insistence to be in control I continue blindly
chasing the wolf in front of me.

The leading wolf beckons me to ignore the howls of my
pursuer.

He insists I follow him into the wilderness.

His fur shines black and demands my attention with his
elegant stride.

He dances around me and whispers temptation in my
ears.

His words fill me with lustful desire and give me worldly
thrills.

He barks in a hellish laughing way as I stumble through
the woods.

Sometimes in the pain I begin to consider leaving his
course.

But he promises me better things as he brings me deeper
into the dark woods.

I listen to his lies and blindly follow.

Suddenly the trees clear and we approach a cliff.

Darkness fills the endless void left outside the edge.

The black wolf turns.

His teeth bared.

The truth suddenly becomes clear.

My master had been leading me all along.

Never once was I truly outside of submission.

I have been a servant to sin and it has led to my
damnation.

In the reality of my wretched nature I cry out for
salvation.

A growl fills the air and something moves from behind
me.

The white wolf launches himself in front and faces the
black wolf in my place.

The two animals fight brutally.

Their battle leaves them unrecognizable as living
creatures.

It seems my hope has ended.

But suddenly the black wolf is cast into his own dark
abyss.

The white wolf lays still before me as His blood pours
from His side.

I watch as my savior dies in front of me.

Witnessing His sacrifice, my heart cries out for Him.

I realize just how lost I truly am.

I have wandered so deep in the forest that I do not know
how to escape.

Suddenly a trumpeting howl fills my ears.
As I turn towards the sound, my heart is overwhelmed.
There in front of me is a trail of blood, left by the wolf
 who saved me, leading me home.
I see His path and hear His call.
I believe in his voice and follow it.
I have faith it will lead me to where the white wolf sits
 alive and powerful—with fur of the purest
 white.

Violence of Creative Satire

You can walk a horse to the river,
but you cannot make him drink...
You can offer a man a drink,
but you cannot make him run...
You can waterboard a man,
and he will do whatever you ask ...

You can drown a stubborn horse and sell him for glue.

Zoe Mathes

Heirloom

The second oldest daughter
Born from the second-oldest daughter
Of the second-oldest daughter
They say women are born
With all the seeds they will ever sow
And we are no different
Mother, you were with her when it crept upon her
As I was with you when it crept upon you
Now it is my turn to bear our heirloom
You coerced my bud before I had even bloomed
Before I could even bear fruit
Your depraved interest in an unripe prize
You continue the tradition more personally
One you were never meant to partake in
Now, the womb which held us
Can no longer protect me
You thank me for my undeveloped blossom
As if you were permitted by me
And with every encounter, I remember the first
I cannot stand to hear your sick tongue
Come from innocent mouths

Made spoiled fruit before I even sprout
Disseminating the one thing
You were bound to protect me from
You are such a good brother

Joinery

The Carpenter has carved two
Who hold each other so gently
As He once did in His hands
Intricately chiseled bit by bit
Weathered by tempests and trials
Crafted to construct the perfect fit
I give praise for my ails
All afflictions are His work
He measures twice and cuts once
Two holding so many faults
Formed by the one who is faultless
Engraven by Him they rise
They meet each other in embrace
Each crevice and crack meet
Not broken — but complete

Submission Guidelines

For works of fiction and creative non-fiction:

- *Do not exceed 20 pages
- *May submit multiple works, but only one work of prose per author will be considered

For works of poetry:

- *May submit multiple works, but no more than five poems per author will be considered

For works of art:

- *Submit print quality (high resolution) .jpg files

For photography:

- *Submit in original picture format (not a .pdf)

For All:

- *You must be a student of Arkansas State to submit any work
- *Include a title and name (as you would want the byline to read) on the same document containing your work.
- *Submit your written works in .pdf or .doc format
- *Attach file in an email (do not copy and paste your document into the body of an email)
- *Email submissions to astatetributary@gmail.com