East Fork: A Journal of the Arts

Fiction

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Conner Schrader

Brianna Williams

Erica Wethington

Carissa Palazzolo

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East Fork:
A Journal of Arts

Conner Schrader

An Odd Case of Lycanthropy

"Ah! Ah! Ah!

East Fork:
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Brianna Williams

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There's Something About the Month of May

For every penny I pass on the ground, I leave a trace of luck. Although I should take advantage of that luck, I just leave it be. There will always be someone who'll need it more than I do. So I sit in the park and ponder all the possible solutions to problems in the world, as everyone should. I watch the trees wave and children run. I listen to the bees buzz, and the wind sing. I smell the fresh cut grass, and scratch at my ankles where it grazes me. While sitting in my spot under the old tree on a blanket too small for me to be protected by itchy grass, I am usually hit with several thoughts about the world. But what hits me this time isn't the sudden realization that I've been conned out of money I've donated to charities, or some bright idea that could cure cancer. No, I'm not that bright. What hits me is a boy.

Well I don't mean literally, I mean emotionally. This boy holds a book in his hand, and a green tennis ball in the other. He has dark brown hair styled perfectly on top of his head, and his skin is untouched by small blemishes. Walking beside him is a black lab whose eyes roam the park eagerly. Around the lab is a purple collar, and although I can't read it from afar, there's something written along the circumference of it. It's stupid right? For me to fall head over heels for the boy's slim frame, and tousled hair? His thick eyelashes and thin fingers entrap me. It must be that, but as I've stated, I'm not that bright.

Each afternoon after lessons, I return to Eden Park and see him with the black lab and a book in hand. Sometimes the book changes every day, like he had plenty of time to read, and sometimes it's the same one from the day before. Once I see him, I'm no longer obsessed with climate change, and our impending doom of the sun one day burning us into Sunday football barbeque. I'm just obsessed with him; with the way his fingers sprawl across the page of the book he's reading, and with the way his jaw flexes when he throws the tennis ball. Or the way he inhales and exhales slowly while turning the page of his book. His focus is completely on the pages in front of him until his lab returns with the ball in his mouth. I'm even obsessed with the way his eyes crinkle when he smiles down at the one thing in the world he can count on as a true friend.

Once a week passes by, I find myself reading the stories he's reading, eager to find the same sparkle in my eyes that I see in his own. And one day I catch him glancing at me under the old tree. I discover that he has the ability to make me hold my breath, and that with one look he can warm my cheeks. That feeling of fluttering in my stomach is foreign to me. Does it happen to every one?

One day, after my lessons, I come to the park and find the boy sitting in my spot under the old tree. I consider discovering a new spot until he looks up and smiles at me. It is not the same smile he gives his dog; that smile is filled with love and compassion. This smile is the smile you give a stranger, and immediately I am disappointed. I don't sit with him. Instead, I head back through the east entrance and walk home.

The day after that he is under the old tree again, but this time when I turn to walk away, I hear footsteps behind me. "Wait!" I turn to him and he stops, chest heaving violently. "I-I'm Jae. I've been waiting for you."

I am shocked to hear this and even a little excited, but I still fold my arms and raise an eyebrow. "Are you stalking me or something?" The sky is clear today, and the sun is shining so bright its reflection bounces off the river behind him. The water is soft today, and I imagine small ripples peaking throughout the surface of the river.

"Well if we're going to bring up stalking you can explain why you've been watching me for a week," Jae says. I feel my entire face warm up. It felt like a cup of tea.

I turn to walk away, but he grabs hold of the inside of my elbow and spins me back towards him. "Hey!" I protest.

"Listen," he says. He looks like he's still trying to catch his breath. "When I saw you here alone, it made me curious. I-I know you don't have to answer my questions, but you wouldn't deny a guy you find attractive a chance to know you right?"

I scoff, "what makes you think I find you attractive?"

"Well when I look at you your cheeks get red," he grins. I feel my face warm, and scream at my brain to stop, but they only get warmer when Jae pokes my cheek.

I snatch my arm from his grip and shove him away from me. "Stop that! Strangers don't like being touched!"

He adjusts his jacket and smiles. "Well if you tell me your name then we won't be strangers." This smile is friendly, neutral.

"It's Heaven," I reply. My voice sounds small so I add, more confidently, "It's unbecoming."

He snorts and gives me another smile, "There's nothing unbecoming about Heaven."

******

The next time I stroll through the park Jae is there under the tree waiting for me. He has me talk for most of our time together. There is one instance where he runs his fingers through his hair, but a chunk of it comes out on his hand. He stares at it with a horrendous expression and then slowly gets up and walks away. I wait for him for about twenty minutes when I realize he isn't coming back. The sky is a little more gray than normal, and the grass pricks at my skin. But it hadn't bothered me until now. Today the park smells like garbage.

I walked through the park again the next day after piano lessons leaving the pennies to their spot on the ground. I didn't expect to find Jae sitting under the tree with a picnic blanket and a basket. He grins at me as I approach him as if he hadn't left me sitting there just yesterday, worried and confused. The lab, Ken, wagged his tail at me and greeted me with a nudge to my hand. I pet him for a moment before turning to Jae. His hair looked thinner, and his eyes were sunken with dark circles under them. His once blemish free skin now had small imperfections.

"Why'd you leave yesterday?"

"My mom made us some bossam," he pulls out multiple containers of food and places them neatly between us. Ken lay his head on my lap while Jae prepares our plates. "It's pork belly. It's really good I promise."

I want to ask why he's ignoring my question, but I pop a piece of pork belly in my mouth instead. "What's the red stuff?"

"Kimchi, try it," he says as he scoops it up with his chopsticks and feeds it to me. My eyes get wide at its spiciness and as if he read my mind Jae hands me a bottle of water. "Sorry....it's usually spicy."

We eat the food in mostly silence, allowing the laughter of children and the waves of the river fill in as conversation instead. It's partly cloudy, with a few specs of sunshine here and there. I scratch at a mosquito bite while Ken nudges Jae to play. Without so much as a peep, Jae throws Ken's favorite tennis ball across the park and we watch him chase after it. He gallops forward, jumping over a bench and pushing fiercely through a bush along the way before he finally catches up to the ball. He trollops back over, and drops the ball in front of his owner. We watch Ken do this for some time until I finally get the courage to turn to Jae.

"So why'd you leave yesterday?"

"Why does anyone leave?" he replies.

"You freaked out cause of your hair?" I ask. He is silent. "It'll grow back."

"Promise?" he smiles, but his eyes don't look it.

"Promise."

For another week, we meet in the park. Usually Jae will have some new dish for me to try, but kimchi is always a part of it, and we will talk about being homeschooled or about our families. We talk up until he is ready to be silent, and then we just conclude our afternoon by playing with Ken.

"Why do you get homeschooled?" he asks. "Do you not like regular school?"

"My parents would rather teach me so that they know I'm learning the right things. What about you?"

"Heaven, I should be a freshman in high school going to football games, and getting lost in the hallway of some school I don't know," he sighs. "Instead my mother thinks it's safer for me to be home. Away from anyone else."

"Why does she think that?"

"Why does anyone think?"

"That's not answering my question," I say.

He opens his mouth to say something, but he starts coughing. I wait for it to pass, but it gets worse and Ken starts barking. It's almost like he's alerting someone that Jae needs help. A few people come over to assess him, and on Ken's collar is a phone number so I suggest someone calls it. Within ten minutes an ambulance is taking Jae away, I want to go with him, but they decide to only let Ken on the truck. I watch it drive away, and then I clean up the mess we made for lunch. On the blanket is a little blood. At first I think it's from Jae, but then I see it sticking to the inside of my thighs. I wrap the blanket around my waist and head out through the east gate.

After a few days of not seeing Jae in the park, I was little shocked to see him there on a Friday afternoon.

"You know...I couldn't find you anywhere because I don't have a number to contact you," I say.

"Don't worry. I'm here now," he says with the smile. His head is bald now, but I tell him it's cute. Whenever I try to make him feel better about it, he just changes the subject or pretends he didn't hear me. Eventually he gives me the phone number to his house so I can call him. But whenever I do he doesn't get to come to the phone because his mom tells me he's resting.

We continue our routine for a while. We meet, eat, and play. It's become a ritual I'm quickly getting used to. I get embarrassed when Jae holds my hand or does gestures like pushing my hair behind my ear. I've never had a boyfriend before so for me it's a huge deal. I want to tell people about him so I tell my mom. She sounds excited about me finding a boy who is interested in my "quirky personality." I wasn't exactly sure if quirky was a good thing, but seeing as Jae hadn't run away from me yet I'll take it as so.

Near the end of the month, I tell Jae that my mom wants to meet him. He kisses me in excitement, and I nearly faint. I share with him that I had never been kissed before until then. I expect him to be a little more wary of me. Instead he kisses me again and says, "First time for everything." Every day with him makes me feel like flying. When we walk along the edge of the pond, he'll put his arm around my shoulder. Having him so close makes me nervous so sometimes I get really stiff. He notices, but never says anything. When I get like that he just kisses my cheek, and I instantly relax. What is it about a kiss that makes one feel so calm?

One day, I decide to share all my secrets with him. And in exchange he shares some with me. He tells me that at night he wears winter gloves because his hands are always cold. He also tells me that he writes poems in a journal. I tell him about my dad passing away and how we used to have picnics under the old tree we now occupy. He vows to make me a picnic of my own comfort food, and to bring his journal so that I can read his poems. It makes me feel special, because I'll be the first person to read his writing. On the last Sunday of the month, I wait patiently for him, but he never shows.

The children are running and laughing, and the grass is still itchy. Cicadas buzz around causing little girls to scream, and allowing little boys to hunt. I'm holding a card for Jae, but since he never came to the park I tuck it into my book bag, and decide that I'll give it to him tomorrow. Perhaps he got exhausted again while walking, and Ken had to bark to get him help. When I call him later, no one answers, but my mom tells me not to worry, and to just be patient.

After lessons on Monday I return to our spot only to find that he isn't there again. The same children are there, but it doesn't feel the same. The parents look more tired, and some pennies on the ground have gone missing. It had rained last night so the spot under the tree was now too wet for me to sit, so I waited on a bench near the river. I jump at the sound of a dog bark or a bird caw, and look around anxiously for Jae's brown eyes and bald head. He had gotten accustomed to wearing beanies, but for the most part would just let the light breeze brush over his head.

On Tuesday, I'm furious with him for standing me up, for making a promise he didn't plan to keep, but I never get the chance to lash out at him. He is gone and, reluctantly, I accept that he won't return. On the fifth day of June, I enter the park from the east side as always and pass pennies on the ground left and right. Before I reach my spot under the old tree I see another penny inches from the grass and pick it up. I guess a little luck won't hurt me for one day.

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Erica Wethington

Mad House

I awoke on a pleasant, sunny Saturday morning to the sound of the neighbor's dogs barking. It was madness.

Attempting to block out the light and noise by stuffing my head under a pillow, I laid in bed for another half hour until the sweet voice of my wife snapped at me to get up. I dragged my feet to the closet, dragged them down the hall and to the kitchen, to the Keurig and the refrigerator, then at last, the front door. The ring of keys I held jingled and clanked together as I slipped on my shoes.

''You told him you would be there an hour ago,'' my wife said.

''I know,'' I replied.

''Don't forget about lunch,'' she said.

''Mhm,'' I replied.

''You're a good man, Charles.''

The dialogue finished with 'I love yous' and wishes goodbye and I stepped out onto to the porch, grunting as the golden beams of the sun pierced my eyes. Walking across the driveway to the rusted pickup truck, I examined the scenery around me, where melting patches of snow were scattered across the muddy ground. As I started the engine and pulled out of the driveway,

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''Roney,'' I said, stepping out of the truck and slamming the door shut behind me.

''Charles,'' the old man replied, shakily pushing himself up out of the porch swing. I held my breath as he inched his way down the thick concrete steps, certain that he would slip. Roney was scrawny and pale and bent over a great deal as he walked, one hand on his hip and the other on the handle of a cane. He was a nice old man, sweet really, but he alw

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ays seemed troubled andanxious. Though it seemed to be more trouble than necessary, grunting with every step, the old man met me halfway across the driveway.

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Carissa Palazzolo

Eight. Four. Seven.

Breathe. In for eight counts, hold for four counts, release for seven counts. Keep breathing, keep counting, stay alive. You're okay, my brain is telling me, my subconscious screaming in order to be heard over the din of every other thought that bounced inside my head. Nothing is wrong. You're safe at home. The couch on which I sat in my dimmed family room was the safest place I could possibly be. But it did not matter what rationality is telling me, what I knew to be true. My emotions, so vivid and present that I felt I could reach inside myself and rip them out, would not listen to the whispered voice of reason.

I should not be struggling like this. I was getting better. I was moving past this... this phase of my life where I would slip in and out of reality, praying that one day I would wake up and I would feel normal. Each day that I slashed off the calendar brought me farther and farther away from him, and all the others like him that glared down at me from their high horses, condemning me to inadequacy. Moving on had been difficult, it was brutal and almost

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I did not, *could not*, understand why my hands were shaking, clammy sweat clinging to my palms. I had been perfectly fine two hours ago, two minutes ago, even. So why was I feeling this now? Why were words from a year ago searing behind my eyes, reminding me of all the things I could never be?

Sitting up from my slumped position on the couch, I planted my feet on the floor, hoping that I would find security and comfort in the solidity of the carpet covered concrete. When I found no stability, I ran a faltering hand through my hair, then reached for my phone. The blue LED lights that blinked the time from the cable box blurred and swam