

Tears of Orion (~4.3k words)

by GB and others

When Orion awoke from his deep slumber, he was greeted by the shadow of Cassiopeia looming over him. All her prior beauty was gone and she had decayed into a gluttonous beast. From where she once boasted divine feminine features arose cavernous greasy wrinkles that made it appear as if her chin and mouth were the beak of a puffin. Her face was pinpricked with freckles and moles, and the bones of her jaw were lost in sacks of fat that sagged next to her neck.

He barely recognized her.

And yet, just the night before, she had glided into his room to sing her promised bedtime story. He had tucked himself gently under two layers of quilted blankets, striped red by black and green by blue. A few midges buzzed through the warm diffused lighting of his bedside lamp. The door was ajar as she sat beside Orion, calmly telling the tale of a lion who did everything to protect his cubs. She was a ravishingly beautiful woman. She had soft, silky skin, high cheekbones, and flaunted maroon hair.

Though all of that was in the past now. Cassiopeia watched as Orion climbed out of his bed and put his thin round glasses on, then, with her voice that had changed from a posh softness to a guttural grumble, she said:

"Before the dust arrives, we must bury ourselves in the sand."

Her skin was so greasy that it began to drip onto the quilted blankets that lay twisted over Orion's knees. He had no clue how long he had been asleep for. All he remembered was a dream that felt like it was enclosed by two lengthy eons of darkness. It was a concise dream, with only a single ephemeral scene that populated his memory:

Orion and Leo drifted on a wide raft across a blackened ocean that acted as membranous undulating plains. The wooden oars creaked against their iron locks. Everything eventually came to a halt and the raft bobbed up and down under a vivid night sky. In the distance was a lamp that flickered between the fog hovering over the surface of the water. They were in the swashing of the bay, not too far away from shore.

Leo prowled on his four legs around the perimeter of the boat until he circled around his ten cubs and took to rest. Orion nestled close, his forearm a supple pillow like a plush velvet throne. The warmth of Leo's underbelly fought the breeze that slipped through the gap between his bottom and back. The cubs sporadically squealed silver tones before settling into innocent mumbles and laughs. All noises were so intertwined within one another, undecipherable on their own. As Orion tilted his head upwards, he saw the black snout of Leo reflect the galaxy around them, each speckle of white projected from the brightness of the unobscured sky.

Orion thought to himself: when one dies, does time speed up or does it slow?

He didn't like that thought. He vehemently hated it, actually.

Orion ignored it and looked in the sky for his constellation— the one that Cassiopeia had named after him when they first settled on the skinny isthmus that extended around the bay. Back then, the ground was a white sand with plentiful bushes of thriving cordgrass, all surrounded by a rainbow of coral pipes in shallow cyan water— the same water that he floated through in this dream.

At first, there was only an oriental dining table standing solemn under a red canvas tarp, its edges glistening like gold in a sharp direct sunlight. Orion was set down on the wood as a boy with barely any cognition, only seeing intermittent flashes of existence every few minutes.

Cassiopeia tended to a row of sheep that she had brought along the isle of sand. The herd had trudged there through the gentle dunes and she tied them to a driftwood pole that had naturally planted itself perpendicular to the shore. Once she settled, she unmasked a tripod that had her dandy camera placed upon it. Orion remembered a flash and then a cloud of smoke. In front of him, with her delicate hands, she held a small copper sheet that was engraved with his naked body and feet dancing in the air.

Soon, Leo came dragging a dead deer carcass. The sun fell into an indigo funeral, and together, Cassiopeia and Leo whispered sweet declarations of devotion to each other. Another flash and cloud of smoke. Another copper plate with the two of them on it, lit with the dim remnants of the day.

Leo had yet to have any cubs. Orion was not their biological child, but somehow, he evolved into that role, growing under their protection. Perhaps it was because, as the moonlight shone down with its somber blue light, Leo and Cassiopeia stared up at the heavens and saw the constellation of a figure with a sword and shield, an honorable warrior— a strong boy— a boy who had withstood a botched birth and illusory parents.

The constellation of 'Orion' consisted of several cyan stars in the shape of a belt. Rigel, Alnitak, Alnilam, Mintaka... and forming his shoulder was the orange Betelgeuse, that daring bastard of a star that periodically rose into a heaving radiance. Orion grew to fear it as a child. He wondered if his own shoulder would snap when the star burst into its predicted supernova.

Cassiopeia saw the child's worry, and, like a good mother, decided that it was unhealthy. She took him into her arms and spoke delicately, telling him that he had nothing to fear, for Betelgeuse was hundreds of lightyears away and the star would not collapse in on itself for centuries. Orion's fear was quelled and he soon returned to innocence. His adopted parents had named him after a brave warrior, and so he was to go brave into the silent darkness that was sleep— a pit of many incumbent imaginings that would only amount to a singular evanescent dream.

Drifting through the bay on the raft, Orion's skin felt soft and waxy. Of course he was named after a warrior, but his hands did not bear the callouses to support that expectation. His skin was now more tender than before, with every bone melting into some nonsensical liquid, some undefined plasma. The hardness of the wooden oars sunk into floppy tendrils and the planks beneath him became cushioned mattresses that had the resemblance of a knotted discourse of pillows. The murmurs of Leo's cubs turned into hushed, deep growls.

Orion was now worried that the water would too become soft and that the raft would sink altogether. Desperately, he looked up and noticed that his constellation was no longer in the night sky. The orientation had been skewed by more than an orbit, but a massive celestial maneuver. It was as if he watched the galaxy turn and streak remnants of inert gas across the sky, as if the past grew infantile and decided to stay rather than leave, overlapping itself like an integrating existence, building into an exposed mess of glare.

A nightmare, surely.

The dream ended when the blackness of the ocean remained, but Leo and Orion were cast in a superb light, beckoning down on them like an angel and making it impossible to sleep or rest.

Orion believed that he woke up intermittently then, still in between those gaps of prolonged darkness. His hair was not ruffled, but smooth and undisturbed, as if during the night he had not tossed one bit. There was but one strange occurrence Orion noticed during that brief rise: his vintage clock, ticking by his bed, had one leg floating off the ornate bedside drawer. He peered into the depths of his sheets, and to his surprise, he was drifting in a light gravity as well, his face hovering above the pillow, spinning unperturbed. A short, confused whimper struggled to find its way out of his throat.

After that, he remembered nothing. The only existence that remained— if it can even be called existence— was that perpetual darkness where time was not allowed to linger until he awoke in the shade of Cassiopeia.

Orion stood up from his bed. Cassiopeia, her stance wide and squatty, did not move. She watched as he bore a confused expression and bumped his head on the door frame— he had grown significantly taller. His feet were now floppy and he had turquoise veins running down his ankles. His striped blue pants only extended to the top of his calves.

Walking outside, the grass around the settlement had faded to whiskers of desaturated yellow spurting out of the sand in uneven blotches. The dunes that once accompanied the small home had been blown into flat and damp bumps that were no more than a foot tall. Calcified bones of mollusks lined the shore of the bay, and when the water receded, masses of coral cracking like porcelain in the dry sun were revealed shamefully by the world.

Orion watched as Leo and his cubs picked vegetables from the humble garden.

Before he had fallen asleep, Leo had hauled masses of soil in burlap sacks from the forest inland. The lion ripped the sacks open and dumped the dirt in an array of mounds to grow all sorts of vegetables.

When sprouts spurted out of the rich dirt, frequently replenished by soft drizzles of cold rain, Orion, still with his intermittent flickers of vision, would remember like a stop motion film the times when he and Leo's firstborn cub, Aurelius, ripped potatoes and turnips out of the ground. Cassiopeia and her elegant hands would be under the shelter of a home that Leo had built from shaving driftwood with his claws into rigid planks. In the light that spilled through the cracks of the creaky structure, she would mix a wonderful broth, filled with the sweet bones of a deer's spine and bay leaves. The aroma would leak into the garden and guide Orion and Aurelius inside, where the boy and the cub, with their shirts rolled into makeshift bags, would dump the vegetables onto a wide mat. Cassiopeia would soak them in salty water and guide her knife through their pudgy starch.

The sun was boiling now. The soil was dry and it had not appeared to rain for weeks— long, uninterrupted, mundane weeks— weeks that could be centuries, for all he knew. Orion greeted Leo, and in return, he lifted a paw. He was thin, now, and the thick golden-brown mane he once bore with honor had been pushed back by the wind to reveal a pale flesh underneath. Leo's predacious eyes, filled with a pungent yellow, had become interrupted by listless blinks that seemed to each deliver a circumambulating vision to Leo's mind— visions of life hundreds of years ago, life when Orion was last awake.

"Cassiopeia is making stew tonight," he said. His voice was exhausted, as if he wanted to fall asleep forever.

Orion knew that Cassiopeia only made stew for big occasions. The last time Aurelius and he had carried the vegetables inside was to celebrate the birth of Leo's fourth cub. Each feast was one marked by special evenings of similar magnitude, only happening every few months or years. Orion was curious as to what this one marked. And too, Leo *never* picked the vegetables— that job was always left to the cubs and Orion. If this was a true momentous occasion that deserved a stew as celebration, then Leo should have been inland hunting a deer for sustenance so that there could be a bountiful load of venison for all his hungry cubs to eat.

But this morning, Leo was not hunting. Instead, he dug his paw into the ground and swiped out a voluptuous pair of carrots, accidentally slicing the fibrous vegetables into shreds. Frustrated by his brash movement, he growled, clenched his paws, and sulked. Leo's cubs dug as well, peeling potatoes and turnips from the soil that had dried with the faded yellow grass. They did not hold the same anger. They were calm in their movements, unaware of the grief that was striking Leo in the very present. The lions kept digging and a pyramid of decorated starch amassed in the old wooden wheelbarrow. They dug

until the garden was empty, the soil entirely uprooted, not a single vegetable left planted.

As Leo was about to begin carting the wheelbarrow inside, Orion asked, "Are you not going to replant some roots?"

"Come inside," Leo insisted.

"It is important that you replant at least a few with shoots." Orion's throat was sticky. It was hard for him to speak. Each consonant was a pout that released no spit but only dry air.

Leo, halfway under the frame of the home that he had shoddily built with a tender love, repeated himself to Orion, "Come inside."

"But—"

"Come inside."

Orion noticed that the wooden frame of the home was infested with bugs and was crippled into mere strands of bark. A horror glided over him. The twilight hours were ending, the morning swiftly transitioning to the afternoon. As he went inside, he remembered Cassiopeia's words:

"Before the dust arrives, we must bury ourselves in the sand."

What dust was coming? He panicked— he didn't want to be buried. He had barely lived. Only now, after waking from the sleep that was his incognizant childhood, he felt as if the vastness of the sea behind the bay was truly comprehensible. He wanted to stay and explore it. He wanted to watch the sunset more than once. Most of all, he wanted to remember things, but that felt so difficult considering that this place already felt like dawn had arrived under a new sun— an alien retreat on an eclectic Earth.

Cassiopeia was silently preparing the stew. She was obese now. Her belly protruded from the floral dress that she hobbled around in. Her shoes uncomfortably grasped bulging purple toes.

"Cassiopeia—" Orion plead, "Speak to me! What is happening?"

She refused to elaborate on her previous single sentence.

Leo entered from the room to the left. Orion looked down— the wood flooring had been replaced, but it was still rotting like the rest of the walls. It was creaky and curved by a hundred years of slow heat that wafted in through the shifting sand below. Behind Leo followed more cubs than Orion remembered... ten, twenty, nearly thirty now. They had grown, too, some almost the burly size of Leo himself. Rooms had been built haphazardly on the extents of the house to give space for each of them, but most of the ceilings were unfinished and only covered with tapestry that was originally woven to be decorative, not functional. Orion guessed it didn't matter anyways since it appeared that rain was now just a phenomena of the past.

But Orion also wondered why it was getting hotter. After all, it was only dawn and his skin was burning even in the shade of the house. He adjusted the seam of his pants as his waist got sweaty.

Why... he wondered— it was too dry for such questions. The static seemed to zap all the curiosity out of the air. Orion just wanted to feel the

table, to use his replenished cognition that had been taken away from him during his perpetual sleep, but all materials, even the oriental, polished wood of the age-old dining table, were numb. So much history in its glistening edges, but so little of it remembered.

“Some died as well,” Leo interrupted the stillness of the dinky living room that fit both the dining table and the clay oven.

“Who did?” Orion asked.

“A few cubs,” Leo glanced as his children pranced to their chairs at the elongated dining table, now squeezed into the room at contorted angles, pushing against the walls and nearly curving vertically so everyone could be fit into an eyeball’s view.

“What about Aurelius?”

Orion remembered the days before he fell asleep. Orion was young then, but now he felt old. Since then time had flowed improperly— backwards, sped up, slowed down, perpendicular, all sorts of azimuthal directions. Those intermittent frames of captured existence, photos strung together, were all Orion could recall.

There was one where Cassiopeia, who back then was still beautiful, would kneel over and tickle both Orion and Aurelius, trading in between festering her hands over their squeamish tummies. The two would roll on the floor and then run off and get lost between the leaning spotted birch trees in the inland forest. The photos were blurry in Orion’s mind, especially those that involved movement— just a bunch of swashes of manic paint.

Leo nodded, refusing to make eye contact with Orion. “Aurelius passed away long ago. Every last one of my first sixteen cubs is gone. Dead. Buried under the garden. At least their carcasses made for good nutrients. The worms loved them. They helped us grow vegetables even when the sky refused to rain.”

Leo took a seat at the head of the dining table. Many wax candles melted between the two distant beings. As Orion found a seat between two cub twins, their growls seemed to become muffled again, just as all sounds did in his dream, dampening between oscillating waves.

On the wall were the many photos of Cassiopeia’s bulky camera. Some were framed, but most were bare copper plates precariously hung by feeble strings. There were three in a row that depicted Aurelius:

The first was Orion and he with their arms wrapped around each other, completely ignorant of the flash and smoke that came out of the camera. It must have taken Cassiopeia hours to fiddle with the tripod and place the camera at such an awkward angle. Orion wondered what it was like watching himself sleep.

The second was Aurelius all grown up, strong and ridden with bulky muscles. He was on a raft with plenty of barrels that held jars of pickled cabbage. He was ready to set off and go further than the bay.

The third was Aurelius, withdrawn and tired, sleeping alone under a dim moonlight. The photo was so faint, and Orion knew that this was Aurelius after the journey that had taken a lifetime. He had travelled to the opposite coasts of the world, across the Pacific and over deep trenches and past isolated islands. In the photo, above Aurelius' bed, was a massive spearfish, hung like a trophy from his travels. It was not there anymore. It must have been eaten once it lost its memorable value after the cub-turned-lion's passing.

Cassiopeia, with her new burly arms, picked up the large steaming pot of stew and hauled it onto the table. Orion took a sip and tasted the nauseating mixture of the woman's grease that had presumably dripped off her face into the pot while she was cooking. The vegetables were sour and rotten, and there was no venison to counter the bitter broth.

A fist slammed the table—Leo was the culprit. His anger was leaking through his gritting teeth. Cassiopeia was not disturbed, but Orion jumped. Leo did not elaborate on his anger until minutes later, when everyone had wiped their faces with pairs of crusted rags and refused to eat anymore of the horrid stew.

"Tell him," Leo ordered.

Cassiopeia gulped and burped. She got up from the table and started polishing a shiny copper plate.

"TELL HIM!" Leo roared. He stood up with his front paws in the air, mounting them on the low ceiling. His claws were jagged and brittle as specks of clay plaster fell on his puffing chest.

Orion leaned backwards into the crowd of packed lion skin that acted as an encompassing couch.

Cassiopeia ignored Leo and finished polishing the copper plate. She then reached under the table and grabbed her tripod and the box camera.

"I will take the photo," she said.

"Tell him what has happened to us. Tell him about where we are. Tell him about why everything is dying. Tell him if this is what dying feels like." Leo crawled over the table, knocking the half-eaten bowls of stew onto the laps of his cubs.

"If we do not hurry, the dust will come before we can bury ourselves in the sand, so I suggest that we go outside now," Cassiopeia calmly replied, with no worry to match the erratic behavior of the lion.

Leo halted, his paw ready to swipe at her ugly cheek. Cassiopeia still paid no attention to him. She placed the copper plate in the box camera and pushed her way through the crammed living room. Leo sulked, his paw still in the air, now facing an absent prey.

"Follow her," he tersely ordered Orion and his cubs.

Orion hid his eyes under his forearm when he went outside. Dawn had brought a sun a thousand times brighter than the one he once swore upon. There was no yellow glaze but just an intense white cast upon every material,

specular or rough. A wind beckoned across the walls of the house. The foundation shook and the tarps that were loosely hung outside cracked like whips. Cassiopeia was walking along the isthmus to a small mound that marked the edge of the bay.

As Orion's eyes adjusted to the exposure, he noticed that Earth was surrounded by layered bubbles of dust, bursting out of an imploding supernova—Betelgeuse, he thought— the Earth was no longer orbiting the Sun, but instead orbiting his own shoulder. The Earth must have slipped out of its secure socket and drifted across the galaxy. Sure, he had no idea how long he had been asleep for, but was it really long enough for Earth to travel so far?

His eyes widened and his pupils lit up. Red, green, blue... all colors mixed to form a rambunctious spectacle, a star that had died and now feared the loneliness of the afterlife. One final spectacle to announce its passing— one last hope to be remembered.

Leo furrowed his brow in sorrow. He gathered his cubs under his arms but didn't feel the tenderness of their fur.

Orion began to cry. His tears glistened clearly as Cassiopeia set up the tripod and placed the box camera to face the wide berth of the receding ocean. The coral had emerged to be a magnificent pattern in the background, like that of a maze, but Orion did not care. He had slept through so much that he had awoken under a new star. His constellation would not be in the sky, for he was inside of it himself. Betelgeuse, the shoulder of Orion, was at his fingertips. Every constellation once drawn by man now irrelevant. The stars were not arbitrarily jumbled, but intricately twisted in perspective with the pattern of planetary movement obscured by the complexity of a tiring universe.

As Orion calmly wept, he whispered, "I've awoken somewhere different than Earth, haven't I? Somewhere far away in both time and space..."

Orion was not in the sky. He had no belt or bow, no form or intention. *Who was Orion anymore?* A dying man, he believed— a dying man that had slept through all of his life, falling adrift as a boy and waking as a young, naive adult, only briefly finding comfort in that dream of the raft, the ephemeral present. He wondered where Cassiopeia had been then. It was only him, Leo, and his cubs drifting out there. She was probably cooking the stew for all that time in the darkness.

"That is Betelgeuse," Leo replied blankly. He began to pucker his lips and speak again, but while looking at Orion, he knew that it was not necessary. Orion knew that this was it. All his existence bundled into a few forgettable memories, drifting in his own constellation.

"Look straight. Do not move for an entire minute— and stop weeping," Cassiopeia groaned, "We have little time. I don't want the photo to end up blurry."

Time doesn't slow or speed up when we die. Orion knew it— he could feel it now. Time ceases altogether. It speeds up *and* slows down. It does both at once. It becomes contradictory, unintelligible by the human mind. That is why that perpetual darkness is always delivered at rest.

Orion's tears slipped onto his lips and into his mouth. He licked the tip of his nose and clutched his stomach as a nauseating force sunk from his mind to his toes.

Cassiopeia uncovered the metal platter and finally let the exposure begin. Orion fell over. He would only appear as a smudge next to Leo, who stood firmly, huffing his chest with his cubs hugging him. Cassiopeia refused to be in the frame of the photo, for she thought of herself as too ugly, but she found an archaic enjoyment watching as the intense light of the supernova crisply diffracted through the lens of the camera.

The last and only photo to commemorate the family's existence was going to be lined with hazy fringes.

It was a formality, she believed— the photo was a way to remember those dying, but the photo would not live the life that Orion had missed. After the minute of patient waiting had ended, Cassiopeia carefully removed the photo, placed it in a ceramic pot, and walked to the shallow bay. But as she prepared to bury it in the sand, a great blast of wind pushed her and every blade of cordgrass to the left. The whole planet shook, faults ruptured, and iridescent particles of dust shimmered like falling confetti in the hollow atmosphere.

Everything was too late.