

*Serenity of the Scholar*

*(1,915 Words)*

The library took on a somber stillness late at night. Quiet, but for the jazz whistling softly from his headphones, the empty halls were a lonesome relic of academia; cavernous and grand. Amongst the volary of bookshelves, one night owl still lingered in its cage.

Gio took off his glasses, placing them delicately on the table, and began rubbing away the anxiety that had begun to bubble around his temples. With practiced rigor, he soothed his skull, placating the stress, like one placates an angry dog by throwing it yesterday's meat. The nascent headache subsided, but Gio knew it was a false calm. The headaches always arrived after 3am.

The young academic returned the wire-thin glasses to his face. The spectacles were sculpted into two perfect circles supported by a sleek black frame; it gave the effect of magnifying his teal-blue eyes to look larger than the rest of his face. Gio was a precocious young man, with sharp avian features. As a child, a classmate made the distinction that Gio resembled a bird; a sharp angular nose and tight lips and ears that were folded neatly against the sides of his skull. It was a comparison that had carried through his scholarly career.

The scholar was surrounded by mountains of research for his thesis. He shuffled the loose pile of papers and books in an aimless hustle, moving aside the coffee, before forgetting what he was looking for. Gio blinked away the dull drowsiness that hung on his eyelids like anchors. He struggled to organize his thoughts to some cohesive idea of what he was writing, before abandoning the attempt and staring blankly at the computer screen once more. The cursor blinked back at him.

As a graduate student, the young researcher excelled. As any matter of student, the curious disciple excelled. In elementary school, Gio had discovered his love of reading and made the

library his roost. Praise from teachers for his astute nature, quiet and disciplined even from the youngest ages, earned the fledging pupil status of favored pet among the faculty; and it afforded him the privilege of flying down the halls on his own, where other students required guidance. Back then, the library had always offered Gio a place of sanctuary, where he felt himself free.

These days, Gio felt trapped. The library held an intimidating intimacy; it was safe from the real world, high atop the ivory tower. The safety of the nest was a roof that confined the scholar from ascending. An anxiety had descended on him, early into his latest academic endeavor. This Alexandrian library, grand and splendid, had come to feel oppressive and impending; each hour of pleasure within the walls was stolen by the future.

Gio feared graduating, not for the unknown, but the indecision. Choices laid before him like books on the wall, each a narrative with its own challenges and rewards. The idea of pursuing a PhD appealed to him, though the loans it necessitated did not. That was an even greater fear, losing the ability to choose what he could not afford.

The cost of an education; one more anxiety for Gio's list. One more straw that fit in along with his stresses about his career, his indecisions, and life in the fast city. Today a letter had arrived from the Dean of research. In polite formal tones, the letter explained that due to this year's fiscal objectives, the funding for the department had been slashed and projects would be 'reprioritized.' The unwritten letter was that if your research did not benefit the university's coffers, you were flying solo.

This thesis was meant to be Gio's crowning moment, the culmination of all his studies, every book, every lesson, everything learned; yet it wasn't. When the graduate student became a graduate, he needed a job, constraining his writing to whatever would sell well with employers. The pressure of the future weighed on the present. He felt trapped, so that all he wanted to do

was take flight and leave it behind him. That was the true devil of it; Gio had come to resent school; worse, resent reading.

High school had seen the fledging juvenile as an awkward, lonely teen, but in University, Gio learned to fly. Accepted to a prestigious northeast college, he joined a fraternity, sat the bow as first rower and captained the debate team. Naturally, classes came easy; his library afforded plenty of study time. Each semester, he took electives in addition to the required courses, simply out of interest. Gio simply wanted to learn, to try, to know everything.

Granted, these elective courses all cost money, but at the time Gio was hardly concerned. The idea that he, Gio, would ever have trouble finding a respectable, well-paying job, simply never occurred to him. The successful navigation of college without so much as rustling his feathers, had reasoned in his mind that the rest of the world would fall below him as he soared.

Lost in the absent state of introspection, the student knocked over his coffee. In a panic, Gio shoved his computer and papers out of harm's way, ripping out the earbuds and abruptly ending the calm of jazz.

“Arrch!”

Gio whipped back, screwing up his glasses. In an apoplectic rage, he stood up and began furiously pacing back and forth. The headache returned violently, and the sting in his ears pierced his mind. Overwhelmed, he felt unable to think; in blind flight, he circled around the room.

With a huff, he finished ranging around the room. Gio's temper cooled to its usually calm and he felt foolish for the episode. Returning to his workspace, he gave an even assessment. The laptop had been spared any serious damage, a minor respite. Most of his loose papers were beyond salvation and two of his notebooks sustained critical wounds, soaking up most of the

coffee; Gio made a mental note to take an in-depth accounting of which dates had been lost. In addition to his own work, one of the library books was now scarred with coagulated coffee. Tomorrow, he would need to attend to the reference desk and explain what had happened– and pay for the damage. Summarizing his account, the poor scholar saw his dreaming would cost him, time and money.

Gio sighed. Dreaming just led him to the same sense of futility and despair. He needed to focus his attention, learn and work on what was in front of him. The thesis needed to be completed; he needed to make decisions and attend to his responsibilities, and fulfill his duty as a scholar. Gio tidy-ed and cleaned his desk, and once more opened to the blank page on his screen. After a moment of watching the cursor blink at him, Gio decided he needed more coffee before anything could be achieved.

Gio flew across the room, and down the elevator, scuttling across the empty lobby of the library, stepping outside and crossed the street to the bodega. As the cashier rung up the night owl's evening snack, a moment of weakness struck Gio and he purchased a pack of cigarettes. As he returned to the elevator, an evasive impulse took him passed his floor and towards the roof. Ignoring the trespass warning, the lone scholar walked up the grated steps to the open air. Something in him felt the need to rise.

The library building was tall and narrow, and the roof was a nest of pipes, wires and vents branching across the small square high top. The sides of the building were marked by a brick hedge that gleamed red under the city lights. A stocky wooden flag pole sat in the corner next to a warm air exhaust, displaying the school's mascot, a black gryphon upon a yellow sky. Along the hedge rows, a barbed palisade fenced the area; talons to discourage anyone from getting too close to the edge. In the past, some students had been known to try to fly.

An evening cool had set in on the city, and the summer air felt crisp. Gio, walked across the chipped tar and pulled himself onto a square pedestal near the edge. From his perch, he could see passed the talons and look out to the city. Planted beneath the library was a park, the heart of which was concealed by thick green foliage. Surrounding the urban forest was a canopy of steel, looming over the city. The half-moon radiated brightly behind faint white clouds in the still of the night. The city seemed at peace.

Gio dazed up at the skyline and beyond, doing his best to soak in the tranquility. A lone shadow cut across the night. Gio watched it with distant curiosity, as it circled high above. He pulled out his cigarette, exhaling deeply as he lit it. The menthol felt cool and harsh on his throat. He blew out the bitterness with the smoke. Turning, he saw the bird had perched itself on the flag.

The owl had landed so quietly; its sudden appearance gave him a start. Gio peered the bird over, surprised by the animal's indifference to his presence. With new found curiosity, he re-examined the corner of the roof, and realized he had intruded on the owl's den.

Decorated in a coat of noble golden-brown, the owl carried an aristocratic air. Spotted by black marks, with tufts of feathers shaped into a tight V; the nocturnal wanderer's expression was inquisitive, if interrogatory. The circle of its face was lined in a thin black. The owl's eye's were a deep bronze, ancient and austere, but not unfriendly.

Stretching its broad wings, the owl readjusted its perch without taking its eyes off of Gio. "My name is Giorgio." Gio said plainly. "So, *whoot* are you?" Gio smiled despite himself.

The owl didn't respond, but instead, cocked its head sideways. Something about the midnight flyer manner reminded Gio of a schoolmaster, an experienced intellectual.

"So professor, what do I do?" The student asked.

A slight breeze grazed the roof top. The owl fluttered its wings to steady itself, regaining its balance on the pole. As the wind passed, the owl began to nick at its feathers, pruning itself of the small ruffles. The instructor did not seem distressed by passing troubles, tarrying in a sagacious calm. Gio watched silently for a moment, before remembering his cigarette.

As he went to draw a smoke, the owl seemed to draw itself up, as if to fly. Gio froze. The Athenian bird leered at him. Gio dropped the cigarette, and snubbed it into the black tar.

For a moment the bird remained crouched, posed ready to fly. The two creatures of the night regarded one another with restive eyes. A tense indecision dove into Gio's heart.

The apprehensive strain wore on the scholar's mind, until Gio cut the air. He stood up, and as he did so the owl lifted itself with powerful beats of its wings. The bird dipped below the palisade, below the ledge of the roof, before rising again. The owl began to fly in a low circle above the rooftop. Gio watched the owl soar, rising with each loop. The bird continued to ascent until it was difficult to make out against the fading light of the moon.

The student stood there, perched atop the roof of the ivory tower. The air felt crisp, and Gio breathed deeply. A sense of gentle serenity dawned on the scholar. Gio smiled, and returned to his studies.