

There is no fire without oxygen.

It is, in essence, a well-understood fact of chemistry that fire dies in the absence of the vital gas with which all animals breathe. A fire burns strongest – brightest – with an abundance of oxygen.

I find the phrase beautiful to think about. There are so many ways it can be interpreted. My mind can go wild with the possibilities of what I can imagine.

“Explain this to me.”

In my head, I can hear my professor already, his pale face twisting into a condescending smirk as he reads the line. I can already imagine my anatomical response: blood rushing to my face in a deep blush that, for the next week, I will be reflecting on to try and figure out if it was at all visible beneath my caramel skin, my skin prickling under my arms and on my palms as I break into a nervous sweat, and my throat closing up as I completely blank on any logical reply I will have brainstormed seconds before the conversation took place, even with all of my planning beforehand.

Introversion has damned me to repeat this process for my entire existence.

I swallow, scanning the room beneath lowered eyelids, my pencil poised over my notebook, over that beautiful phrase. The line of my peers curves into the middle isle of the large lecture hall, the green auditorium seats acting as blockades so that people know where to stand. Most of the class is chatting with whomever they are standing near, smiling and laughing and comparing verses as if they’ve known each other for years.

I know this can’t be the case. At the beginning of the semester, everyone made sure that there was an extra seat in between themselves and the next person. I watched.

Now, two weeks into the class, only five people purposely sit segregated from the others. Including yours truly. And, if I’m being honest, the other four people, all seem like people I would willingly socialize with.

If I willingly socialized.

Group projects are usually my way into social circles in classes. Unfortunately, we have none in English 2600: Literary Analysis Techniques. Translation?

I will remain a loner in English 2600: Literary Analysis Techniques.

Still, I can’t quite seem to accept that this is a bad thing. (Here comes my introversion again, haunting me still.) I see this class as an opportunity to rest – to recharge myself before I have to emerge from my box, in a way, and communicate with people and be happy about it. Which I am, most of the time, especially when it is with Shayna or Rajani, my best friends.

Well, I *did* see this class as a charger for my battery until Professor Gerald Hemeny announced today that he wanted each of us to create a seven-line poem about fire, and that he would give us fifteen minutes to write the first line in class before he critiqued each and every one. Our line is our ticket out of class – and our participation point for the day.

None of this assignment sounded terribly horrifying to me before he mentioned the word “critique.” After that, I felt the hairs on my arms rise, and my heartbeat began to race in the slightest. I froze for a moment, eyes wide, trying to calm myself down using basic logic.

He is not going to humiliate you in front of the whole class.

Well he definitely won’t if I am the last person to show him my verse.

He is helping you, making sure you are on the right track in the assignment.

The assignment is to write about fire. How can anyone *possibly* get off track?
This will ensure you get an A on the assignment.

True....

At this point, I had calmed down enough to begin focusing on my work (like every other normal person in the room) and came up with the awesome quote aforementioned.

I rest my gaze on Hemeny, watching his interaction with a student sporting curly black hair, an Adidas pull-string bag, a red T-shirt, and black basketball shorts. He is nodding as Hemeny says something to him with a serious expression on his face. The professor starts pointing at the paper while looking intently at the student, which in turn causes the poor guy to freeze. Hemeny's dark eyes are wide and his mustache brushes his bottom lip as he emphasizes something, and Adidas Bag nods again. By now I can tell he is just trying to get out of here.

Finally Hemeny looks at the paper, seems to grumble something, and then shoves the piece back towards Adidas, who grabs it and all but runs from the room with relief. He is not the first student to sport that look of fear in his eyes. Everyone that has walked out of the room today has looked at *least* pissed off.

I can already safely assume that I will not be an outlier.

I have long been trying to decide whether or not I like the professor enough to call him by his last name, or if he is annoying enough for me to address him (to everyone except for him, of course) by his first.

Gerald it is.

No one else is sitting down.

I sigh inaudibly, pack up my belongings, check to make sure I have everything in its rightful place, and then stand, my green cushioned seat springing back into its folded position as I maneuver my way out of the row near the middle of the lecture hall that I have grown comfortable with and to the back of the diminishing line of my classmates. My sheet of paper is clutched in my right hand, and I grip the straps of my backpack to try to hide my nerves.

What to say, what to say.... I will again attempt to break through my usual routine of looking like an idiot in front of authority because my traitorous brain is programmed to react differently.

What is the purpose of your piece? To show...to explain how fire and oxygen are so similar to love and loss. You are the fire. You burn so brightly and so fiercely when your oxygen, your loved one, is there in abundance, supporting you and loving you and respecting you, but when they leave, or they die, or they start taking some of those attributes that kindled your... I realize the line has shifted quite a bit and I scramble to catch up to the dark-haired girl wearing her red headphones in front of me. That kindled your fire away... It's like taking the oxygen out of your lungs and suffocating you. It is kind of ironic, actually, because... because in devastation – in heartbreak – everyone describes themselves as not being able to breathe, their chests tight, the air in the room being gone. We move closer. Only five people are in front of me now. I tune out again, my heart beating faster in anticipation. Like the oxygen that helped you burn was ripped away, and now your fire is dying. You are dying. Without that oxygen – that love – you are dying.

My mind revolves around this revelation.

You are dying... are you dead?

If we are not loved, can we even be truly alive?

Red Headphones steps up to the plate, her music stopped, her headphones now around her neck as Gerald reads her paper.

I swallow again, clutching my paper, reading over the line again.

There is no fire without oxygen.

I reassure myself. *You know what to say. Just say it. Be confident. You know what you're talking about.*

I swear Red Headphones took all of five seconds before she left, revealing Gerald and his fuzzy mustache and his thinning hairline and his dark eyes waiting in front of me. He looked to be about fifty, his wrinkles formed but not overpowering his thick features. I stifle a cringe and approach the black stone counter.

I hand over my sheet and he immediately begins devouring what little I have written.

He makes a noise that sounds like the child of a grunt and a hum. "I'm not sure I like this wording. It adds dramatics to the piece, yes, but I think you should restructure your sentence." Why? "It seems almost...childlike with you beginning with the word 'there.'" Is this a joke? "Be more creative with your syntax—you can express so much meaning if you just use the right words." Don't you think that's kind of what I'm already *doing*? "What is this supposed to be about?" He pins me with those emotionless eyes. His voice, normally not irritating me in the slightest, is now sounding more like nails on a chalkboard. I wonder if it is because of how aware I am of the number of insults he was able to pack into those five sentences.

A collected, respectable person would calmly explain exactly what I brainstormed in my head all of twenty seconds ago so that the purpose of my poem would be well understood to Gerald.

I am not that person.

"It's about fire, um... I just—I was just focusing more on it in a metaphorical, um, way, so I was going to compare it to emotions and how people compare their emotions to fire and burning a lot.... Yeah." I stutter, my hands moving in the air around me, my eyes finding it hard to stay focused on his. It takes all of my energy to hold his gaze, and I swallow again.

True to my nature, my face is burning.

How ironic.

I want to strangle someone. Maybe Gerald, for doing this to me.

I clench my teeth as he replies, "I want you to emphasize that more in this first line, and in the second. Don't make the message, the comparison obvious to the reader, but emphasize emotions more, if that is your focus." Gerald, this is a *poem*. Poems are supposed to be *vague*. What you just told me to do is literally not possible. "I want more emotion. I'm not quite sure where you're taking it yet, but I am sure that it will be more noticeable next week." When I make it obvious. Great. He hands me the paper.

Externally, I nod enthusiastically, forever accepting. Forever bowing. "Okay, I will. Thank you." I say politely.

He ignores my kindness and instead says in return, "Name?" His pen is poised over his attendance sheet, waiting.

"Uh, Adelaide Asghar." I say, watching him mark me off. He nods and I turn and scurry from the room, my body barely keeping from shaking. I feel as though the temperature drops twenty degrees back to a more normal level as I step into the hall.

Ugh, you had everything figured out perfectly! All you had to do was explain it like you did in your head! I mentally scold myself. But I know. I have always known. Always tried.

It is impossible. Being who I am, it will never work. Not on a moment's notice. Not in fifteen minutes. Not without practice, and patience, and preparation. It just won't happen.

I hate this. I hate that I can't pull myself together like I have seen so many people do on so many occasions. Jani is part of an *improv* club, for Pete's sake! My best friend!

But me... I just can't. Not "I won't." Just "I can't." It is not who I am.

I emerge from Hart, the English building, into the cool ten o'clock air, and raise my eyes to the blue sky, a few puffy white clouds hovering overhead, the sun glaring down on me to remind me that everything has a reason. Everything exists in this world for a reason.

There is a reason I am the way I am.

There is a reason Gerald is an ass.

I take a deep breath and head for Jamison Hall, where I will meet Jani when her piano class ends at ten fifteen. I take out my small headphones and plug them into my ears while I let my mind drift back into itself, let it explore itself and all of the possibilities even more.

If we are not loved... I play Oh Wonder's "White Blood," wanting something that relates to my thoughts in some way. Because, like the song, the thought haunts me.

If we are never loved...

Are we even truly alive?



Rajani can barely contain herself.

She spills the story of how she was late waking up this morning and had to get ready in negative five minutes because she had an exam in her piano lab, and *of course* today is the day when everyone decided to drive to school so she had to circle the entire parking lot for – no exaggeration – *ten minutes* waiting for a spot to open up. And when one finally did, she pulled into it so desperately that she managed to not only scrape the white Jeep next to her but also tap the red Prius across from her. She then proceeded to examine both cars for five minutes (even though she had only two minutes to make a seven and a half minute walk to her lab) and stress about how her gold paint shone clear as day on *both* vehicles on which it should not have shone. But, alas, she had to get to class, which she literally sprinted like a madwoman to, and ended being only six minutes late, panting like a dog, sweating like a mug, with hair that looked, in her words, like a rat's nest had been attached by a lion and then dragged by a speeding semi down a gravel road. With potholes.

"Not to *mention*," She shrieks as we head for a table outside of Cormack, the hall where my next class is in an hour, "this is the lab with the incredibly hot TA! Now he probably thinks I'm the most ridiculous, crazed leper he has ever had the misfortune of coming into contact with!" She throws up her brown hands in surrender, chucking her mint-colored backpack on the ground next to our table and falling onto the bench. She knocks her forehead against the tabletop as I try to contain my hysterical laughing. "You," she jerks her head up and points at me, narrowing her chocolate brown eyes, "think it's funny now, Del, but *trust me*. When you *see* this TA, you will understand what a complete *horror story* my life has become! *Horror!*" I fall into the seat next to her, trying to breathe through my laughter, dropping my head onto my

arm. Jani just shakes her head at herself, her expression a mixture of shock and mock despair. Her long, straight, thick black hair is no longer befitting a cavewoman, and is braided beautifully to flow over her left shoulder.

I finally catch my breath enough to say, "I'm sure it wasn't as bad as you're making it seem." I am nothing if not a good friend – trying to reassure her that she still has a chance at being with a hot TA whose wife just gave birth.

Small obstacles. Every relationship has them.

"Oh no, Del, it was. I cannot even exaggerate this catastrophe right now. I just can't." She assures me. I chuckle and take out a banana to begin curbing my relentless appetite. "I would demonstrate just how insane I looked, but I never want to go back to that place again. Ever."

I shake my head at her. "Well I'm sure you did great on your exam...." I have to at least help her find a positive in all of this. She glares at me and I laugh again.

Jani groans. "I *should* be *responsible* and go put my insurance card on those other two cars, but that just not the kind of person I am. So I'm going to avoid adulthood and lay down on this table and contemplate why I insisted on just "one more episode" last night instead of being smart and going to sleep." She has been obsessed with the show *Chopped* for about a month now, even pirating episodes on her computer so that she has access twenty-four/seven. It's a problem.

"I wonder the same thing about my chapters in my book," I am currently reading an amazing book, and to my great pleasure, it is part of a series, so I have even more plot twists and discoveries to make! "But then I remember that some things are too good to put down on the first try." I take a bite of my banana.

Reading came to me like snow on Christmas day; something that I had always acknowledged was there but had never contemplated deeply until, one day, I really saw it. My parents had always kept a bookshelf in my room stocked full of books, and they had read to me when I was younger and curious about cute characters on the covers of stories, but had never forced it onto me. I had been allowed to discover the treasures that lie within those pages on my own time, in my own way. And when I finally decided to open my eyes, what I saw – what I see now – is more incredible than I could have ever dreamed. My own hopes, fears, dreams, imaginings are miniscule compared to the hopes and dreams of all of us *combined*. Opening that portal into new worlds, new minds, new understandings – I realize how beautiful the world is. Reading allows me to live more fully within my own life, but it also allows me to take a step out of myself and become someone else, if only for three hundred pages. It's an escape, a release. A reminder that anything is possible.

It is too good to set down on my first attempt.

Jani splays her hands across the table. "Yes! Exactly! I can't just drop my baby on the ground! I have to carefully lay out her blanket, gently lower her to the floor, and make sure she is comfortable before I can let her go with satisfaction!" She agrees, *Chopped* being her metaphorical daughter, apparently. I roll my eyes, but I do completely understand her attachment.

Jani sighs as I finish off my banana. "I do think I aced that test though." She admits, grinning fiendishly at me.

I laugh and get up to throw away my peel before settling in next to her again. "Oh, by the way," I say, knowing she'll understand what I'm about to say. "It's Gerald."

She grunts out a laugh. "Uh oh. What'd he do?" She props her head in her palm to listen to my short story.