

Daniel Galganski
The Lion in the Sky

The boy looked up to the night sky like he had since he was a babe, in search of the Lion named Leo, but tonight, clear as it was, Leo was missing. The stars he wished on, the ones he was born under, the ones he shared had ceased to shine.

He subdued the panic rising in his chest. *Focus*. He spoke aloud. Father would know what happened, were he here. He would have picked him up and put him atop his shoulders. Close enough to touch the stars, he'd say. The two of them would solve this mystery, the boy was sure. Father knew everything, not everything like Mother, but everything enough.

There had to be some scientific explanation. Astrology had long given ground to astronomy, stripping some of the spirit out of the boy, like when he was a child and learned of Santa's lies.

Regulus, the alpha star, the little king, was too young to have burnt out. He knew that, it was his favorite fact to recite to his Father's peers. You could spin him round and round and he could still pin a tail on Regulus. Spinning the tail on the donkey, at Clara's birthday party, was another story.

The boy shut his third story window, welcoming the familiar creak as it closed almost all the way. A black hole nightlight guided his way to his favorite grey-blue quilted jacket. He couldn't help but take a quick peek in the mirror, admiring his buffed up, shy stature. The boy descended the stairs two at a time, knowing Mother was asleep by now, long immune to the house's groans. Boots slipped on without untying laces. The boy cracked the door to listen. Nothing but the strong hum of insects doing their insect thing.

Hello to you too. The boy looked for ghastly shadows but found only the friendly trees who gave him shade in the summer months. The boy stepped out, closing the door behind him. He immediately turned and twisted the handle. Still unlocked. The air was that particular crisp night air which bridged Winter and Spring as if Winter still sought recognition of its own presence.

The boy hated their farmhouse and ached for the big city life everyone lived in the TV. But Mother loved the peace of the farmhouse, the simplicity of the chores and of course, the stars. He made a mental note -- *maybe she had a point, maybe*. She did say the stars burned less bright next to the city lights. Much to the boy's chagrin, he could not lend his experience to her truth.

The boy looked up again, craning his neck till it hurt, resisting the pain out of pride, only to be disappointed to find Leo still gone. The stars circling Leo seemed to blink with alarm from their darkened brethren.

A light drew him down from the white polka-dotted sky just beyond the oak with the tire swing. Father never failed to swear the swing was over a hundred years old. Here, a more unlikely story began to unfold in front of the boy's eyes. A spectral tiger, no, lion stepped into view. Fireflies followed the lion, nipping at his tail like a trail of sparks.

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/3

Flight! Flight! His system tried to engage with no avail. The lion shimmered in a blazing blue-white light -- the sort you see when you stare at a fire too long.

Hello boy. The Lion spoke. The boy only knew Lions to speak in the pages of his stories. The fireflies froze at the Lion's voice, a silky boom, like a crack of thunder.

The boy collapsed in the gravel road, pieces sticking in flesh but it was all numbed from the cold. *What...*

I am Nemeos and I am the icon who's stood in the sky. I've heard you boy and I have come.

The Lion closed the gap, his paws the size of planets, igniting gravel and grass. The boy reached out feeling drawn in but pushed away. Like one would reach for the sun, his arm stretched becoming a phantom limb.

Go on.

His hand touched the Lion's mane and it burned with an itchy pleasure. The mane had a silky texture much like a well made scarf. The boy pulled back fast for fear of entanglement.

Why are you here?

The Lion cocked his head at the question, the tiny tails of his mane waving in the last winter gust.

I've been lying in the sky imagining this moment, as one life cycles into the next in a place where time cannot be trusted.

What's it like, to be in the sky?

An infinite kaleidoscope of color. Stuck in a veritable sea of stars, suspended, you watch unable to act yet you cannot cry out. Space is a place not unlike a prison where gods and beasts discover envy.

Envy of us?

Yes. Envy to live again, to feel the rush of failure and success. Of love and of hate.

At the last word, the Lion licked his lips and leaned close. His fur, if you could call it that, smelled of a doused fire. The boy rose, wiping away the gravel stuck to his hands, the signature white dust leaving a stain.

How did you fall from the sky?

Who said I fell? See here, look above me boy if you don't believe. Look at Lyra as she comes alive to set a lullaby to the sky. Do you hear my sister, playing her melancholy melody?

The boy stood still, squinting to see the sound. Lyra, the harp, seemed to vibrate in the sky and in an instant the sound cut through the light years to the boy's ears. It was faint but supple, the one you'd imagine grass dances to as it waves in the wind. The boy rocked back and forth like a tide under a watchful moon. The Lion watched, his eye's balls of spectral energy, impossible to discern.

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/3

You see, I know every star in the sky, I feel the heat from them, the pulsing ache as they wait to become dust. The physical hearts they once had still beat, each with a story to tell. Do you want to hear mine?

The boy opened his mouth but mustered only a small nod of his head. The Lion sat on his well muscled haunches and crossed his giant paws in a perfectly human gesture.

There was a great beast once, who ruled along the salty seas doing as he pleased. But the beast, being a beast, was looked on with ire. One day, when a man, hardly a man, came into the beast's domain, he did what man does best. He took. He took and took like a beast himself until there was nothing left to take. It took just a moment to suspend the beast in the sky, to crystallize a feeling of despair. But the man could not conquer time. Time waltzed across the sky, sending cracks that took a millenia to break.

Yours is a sad story.

It is. But only for one side. Every story has a heaven and a hell but the worst place to be is in the middle with no story to tell at all.

But the heavens are in the sky?

All that shines is not all good.

The Lion sat up and circled the boy, curling like a snake. A strange heat emanated from the Lion, a match just lit.

Are you here because I am a Leo too?

Yes. Yes. The Lion hissed. *Smart boy like all little Leos should be.* The boy grinned at the compliment from this king of beasts. The Lion circled closer.

Sit my boy. A command. The boy lowered himself down, his hands wetted from accumulating moisture, careful this time to avoid the sharpest of gravel. The fireflies had gone.

Good. Do you remember what you wished upon my stars?

The boy shook his head no. *Because you wished upon my stars a thousand times?* The Lion asked.

This time, the boy nodded. A sliver of sun began peeking on the horizon. The Lion noticed.

I've been listening. He purred. *I've heard them but there's one, once said, that cracked what time had creased.*

The Lion, Leo, wrapped himself around the boy and whispered in his ear, whiskers sending a tickle down his spine. But the words sent fear right back up.

Dear boy be not too afraid for I will place you in the sky where you once wished to belong.



The Lion stopped at the door and looked up to the night sky to see the stars shine once more, but from his view, they seemed to shine even brighter.

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/3

Watch boy, watch like I watched and maybe one day, you'll become wise. The Lion then added. But don't start your watch just yet.