**Star**

Sam Fouts

You were a mess after your mother died, flung about the light-years in the sprawl of your infant nebula. But as gravity would have it, you condensed from the ashes and ignited into a yellow star. Humble in size and sheen, planets soon took root in your orbit, but each was indifferent to your light, too hot or too cold to sustain any onlookers or beings that hungered for your heat. So lonely photons drifted outwards. Found themselves caught by cold rock and manic torrents of gas. And many more would be cast deep into the galaxy, shot down empty channels, far from any planet or star—where only stray dust played. But as time trickled onward, your image would find a home across the sky of a planet Earth. By then, your youthful hue had bloated into a searing red, but for the first time, there were those who saw your light.

Such awe in their eyes.

To the first you met, you were the centerpiece of a constellation, one of eleven stars, the whole design amounting to a face in the sky. It had a pointed chin, slender cheeks, hair that sprung out from its head like a river delta, and you were its sole, red eye, looking down upon the humans who adopted you. And prowled after your likeness. So enamored, they scoured their land for roses and peonies, precious, ruby stones, hoping each offering would bring them closer to your color—your favor. But they succumbed to a plague instead, and for millennia, you would remain another crumb in the sky. Until two lovers found your light, snug in a blanket of grass.

They named you Henry. And as Henry, you continued to join them on their dates, where they'd catch you each night through the telescope they’d received as a wedding gift. But when they found jobs and a home in the city, only fluorescence lit their nights. To catch a view was an hour's drive northward, and no lens in their budget could see past the electric smog. So that first night in their apartment, they wept. The melancholy trailed them through the weeks but pricked them duller each month, and after a year you were a memory, lost between taxes and laundry and a baby boy carrying your name.

Though, when their lights went out for good, when the sun set on the waste of their world, your unfettered image returned to the sky, and those who’d grown accustomed to sterile city nights watched the stars rain through their shattered windows. Among the remaining lot was a young girl who spotted you through tangles of dead trees, followed your flare to a lake, and drank. And grateful, she followed you further. Then followed you off a cliff and drowned in white water. Then in a blink of an eye—your time—the rest of her kind followed, leaving nothing of them but their ruins. The dirt. The water. The sky. And you.

You churned on without a wince and hung over terrestrial nights even as the last skyscrapers gave way to wind and creeping tides. Even as the pyramids made their way into dust and Earth’s continents shifted into a new world, your light endured. But you faded too. And after billions of years, you shed your outer layers, leaving your stellar core to swim in the ashes of former red. Cooling, cooling, cooling. Eternities adrift as a husk, riding the arms of your galaxy and waves of time until you were but char, like the head of a spent match: dead. And you had no tears, but

I cried.