

Third Prize: The Subtle Refrain of Adulation *by Vicki Thomas*

Elwyn stumbled through the forest, clearing a path with his fuzzy hands until he reached the stream's edge. They can't see me here, he thought, or hear me. He sat down on a flat rock that tipped out over the fast-moving water.

He came to indulge his true passion, music. Most elves are not musical. That realm belongs to the fairies, and most elves think fairies are cumbersome, annoying creatures.

Elwyn disagreed. He found their world enchanting, their music so ... musical. He pulled his flute out of his pocket (he kept it with him always) and began playing a beautiful melody.

The music glided from the flute into the forest. Some of the animals stopped to listen to the magical sound. Others added their own harmony to Elwyn's melody. It seemed the entire forest became its best when Elwyn played his flute, something he couldn't do around the other elves. They couldn't appreciate his talent.

He felt, more than saw, someone hovering in the trees nearby. He slowly turned his head as he continued playing. He made eye contact with the most beautiful fairy he had ever seen. She was floating just above the ground.

Her caramel skin was complemented by her ever-changing eyes, first the color of moss in the rain, then as blue as ice on a sunny winter's day, then a mix of amber and sunset. Her wings, more bronze than silver, cast a shimmering shadow among the lacy curtain of underbrush. But the look on her face was what kept Elwyn playing and staring in her direction.

She looked sad, hovering there and swaying with the music. She would occasionally close her ever-changing eyes and disappear into the sound. Elwyn continued, afraid he would frighten her away. This was the first time he'd ever seen any fairy up close, and he was enchanted.

The beautiful bronze fairy floated gently toward him, her flickering wings reflecting the sun, the shadows, the forest. Elwyn finished the song as she approached. The forest held the silence, only the whisper of her wings providing an ovation, recognizing the beauty of the tune.

"Your song was lovely." Her voice was as lyrical as Elwyn's music. He was shocked that she spoke to him. Fairies don't speak to elves.

"You are lovely," he said suddenly, without thinking. He was as surprised by his own comment as she looked. She shook her head and her caramel skin glowed bronze.

"My name is Philomena," the floating fairy said. "Your music is beautiful."

Finally someone understood his musical passion.

"I'm Elwyn."

"You are elven. So different from the others." She spoke with certainty, her eyes changing with every flicker of emotion that crossed her face and filled her heart. "And your music is so beautiful it can feed the souls of all our starving fairies."

He looked at her uncertainly.

Before he realized what was happening, he was inside a large bubble, floating above the forest floor, matching Philomena's hover. He had heard that fairies fed on music, a tale he'd thought was meant only to deter musically inclined elves. He would soon know whether it was true, as Philomena was guiding his fragile floating orb toward her fairy village.

They spoke in a language foreign to him, but beautiful and lyrical. He instinctively reached for his flute to accompany their songlike voices. The melody that poured from his flute saturated his listeners. They stopped their conversation and gathered round his transparent stage. When his song ended, the fairies all agreed. Elwyn would stay.

He played until the sun disappeared behind the mountains and the dazzling brilliance of the silver moon shadow danced on the fairies' wings. Elwyn was having a great time, floating above the forest floor, playing his flute while the fairies sang and danced. Playing for others' adulation was a dream come true.

At long last, he felt tired, drained really. He put down his lute.

But the fairies weren't done dancing. "Keep playing!" they ordered.

Although he was exhausted, the flute went to his mouth, seemingly on its own. His fingers found their position on the instrument, and he played.

But now the music was sad. Instead of feeding the fairies, it left them weak and empty. They ordered him to play the happy songs he had been playing, but he was too tired to make that kind of music. He just wanted to go home.

Philomena approached him in his hovering prison. "Elwyn, you know you can't leave, don't you? You must continue to play for us. To feed us. To belong to us."

"I can't," he managed to croak between songs, crying softly.

The fairies dropped to the ground, the sad music killing them one by one. Their deaths struck him with such sorrow that his music reflected that sorrow, and more fairies fell to the forest floor.

He played on till the sun peeked over the mountain. Philomena was the only fairy left barely alive. Her bronze wings were fluttering so softly now that Elwyn could see the veins flowing with her purple blood. Her eyes were changing colors slowly and her body was quickly losing its lifeblood. He stopped playing.

"Philomena, I need to rest. Just let me rest," he begged.

She looked up at him in his floating prison, and her eyes flashed crimson, then gold. Elwyn, wan and withered, stared at the lovely Philomena, her eyes still sparkling with color although she was so near death. As she took her last breath, he touched his bubble prison. Instantly it popped.

Without hesitation, he laid his flute on the forest floor beside Philomena. He touched her cheek gently, then turned and walked toward home.

Vicki Thomas, an English teacher at Greater Johnstown High School, enjoys biking the trails in the Laurel Highlands with her husband, Jeff, when she's not teaching. Vicki has always enjoyed writing and has finally found the time to pursue her passion. She is the mother of three sons, Andrew, Eric, and Matt, who are truly awesome.