

HEPL Adult Writing Challenge – Classics Reimagined

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Dream Piper

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Birds are sweetly chirping in a vast field with wildflowers. Peter breathes in the fresh air and reaches out to take the hands of his parents, pulling them close. A feeling of contentment and peace infuses his being. His mom cups his face and whispers, “*Play your flute for us. We need to hear your music.*” Eyes blurring, he turns his attention to her image as it begins to fade away.

Peter jerks awake in his cold compartment and remembers his appointment with the Guardian. Looking at the time display, he panics with the thought that he has overslept. The twenty-year-old brushes his sandy brown hair back from his face, quickly dons his stiff, dull brown uniform, and hurries to catch the train to the Hub. He approaches the ornate door of the Office of the Guardian. Passing through security, an officer escorts him into a plush and richly appointed room. Peter stands before the gray-haired leader. The old man’s head is bent in concentration over his laptop. He seems to carry the weight of the city on his broad shoulders as the bulk of his body stretches the fabric of a uniform festooned with medals. On the credenza, a single red apple sits off to the side in a small cut crystal bowl and Peter tries not to drool over this scarce piece of fruit.

From the corner of his eye, Peter spots a small child dressed in a cobalt-colored jacket that matches the older man’s official outfit; this young boy with curly blond locks and cornflower blue eyes looks up with curiosity at the instrument case he holds in his arms. Peter winks, and the child averts his eyes immediately and ducks behind the desk.

The imposing leader looks up from his grand oak desk, and his gray eyes flash with recognition. He motions with a manicured hand that Peter should sit down, and the young man lowers himself carefully so as not to wrinkle the cushion. He knows his place in this stratified society, so takes this time to ponder why the Guardian has summoned a lowly worker like himself.

Their sanctuary city was an engineering marvel; talented architects created a multi-level center hub with a rail system that radiated out to the living quarters; each section domed but connected like a space station. A screening system had culled applicants for residency in this exclusive enclave. Peter’s parents were eminent microbiologists, who received many offers from communities worldwide. The Guardian promised that their only son, a young music prodigy, could continue in his studies if they joined the refuge in Hopewell City. This arrangement impressed them, and they persuaded many of their colleagues to join them in the labs that were also provided. All the scientists hoped to continue their work on the climate crisis so that this living arrangement would only be temporary.

One thing Peter remembers clearly was sitting with his folks as they enjoyed the projections cast upon the dome in the Hub. His favorite scenes were snowy evergreens with colorful lights in December and gently falling leaves in October. These times were sacred because the family was together, and Peter's parents talked about things in nature they missed the most; they all longed to see the actual conditions, hoping for signs of recovery on the Outside, but these prescribed scenes would have to suffice. Most evenings, Peter would play his flute, practicing whatever piece of music his teacher had assigned, and they would applaud. He continued to flourish in his musical abilities.

Then came the fateful day when Peter received the news. Officials reported his parents had died from infection with the Virus in their lab. Because of the risk of contamination, masked guards immediately rushed their bodies off to the Underground for disposal. Even young Peter knew his parents were always meticulous in their safety precautions; to this day, he couldn't understand how this had happened. The powers that be did not even allow him to say a proper goodbye to them. Not long after his parents' untimely deaths, Peter's music lessons ceased; the reason given was the necessity for every worker's time to be dedicated to keeping Hopewell City safe. No need for the arts. The Guardian's office reluctantly gave permission so Peter could keep his instrument; he only played his flute softly at night, which calmed the ache in his heart and brought solace to the other orphans who slept in his dormitory.

The teenaged Peter then became an apprentice to an engineering manager, helping to supervise the energy production unit. Most of the workers were children because the tasks required small hands to work in tight spaces. Tiny crystals, extracted from cerulean gems, powered the energy cells that kept the domes humming. Older workers tirelessly mined this resource on the underground levels.

The deep, sonorous politician voice of the Guardian cuts into his thoughts, and he comes back to the present.

"Ah yes, Peter, is it? Thank you for coming."

Peter thinks to himself, *As if I had a choice*, but respectfully replies, "Yes, sir. How may I be of assistance?" Although he no longer has formal lessons, the two musicians still meet up when time allows, and that response was the line Johann, his music tutor, coached him to say.

Bushy eyebrows raised, the Guardian smiles at Peter's positive attitude and willingness to serve. He loves when his followers are eager to please him in whatever way they can.

Gesturing to the file on his computer, he says, "You come with excellent references. To put it plainly, there is a serious situation that requires your unique talents. Of course, we will demand your utmost discretion in keeping this issue completely confidential."

A pause.

“Did you bring your flute?”

The little blond head pops out from behind his grandfather’s massive chair, bright blue eyes dancing with excitement.

Picking up the case from the floor where he had placed it, Peter replies, “Yes, sir.” He lovingly opens the clasps and carefully lifts the silver instrument out.

“Johann, your former tutor says you can charm animals with your music. He informed me that evidently, when you were still on the Outside with your parents, you could entice your family dog to do your bidding. We need your help in coaxing a pair of lovebirds down from the rafters of the Hopewell Aviary.”

Sensing the surprise at the exception made for the *no pet* regulation, the Guardian adds, “They belonged to Mrs. Hopewell, our beneficent patron, who financed the entire housing complex. She has since passed after an illness and now our scientists fear the birds pose a risk of carrying the Virus. It is a top priority to put them in isolation. We must capture them, or the last measure is to shoot them down, but that might cause damage to the dome’s membrane that has kept us safe for the past fifteen years.”

Peter gets a warm feeling thinking of how they want to keep the beautiful birds alive in honor of the woman who founded their refuge. He still recollects his pet canary named Pietje, who sang so sweetly with such complicated trills even while confined in a cage. Just after the Crisis began, authorities destroyed all pets, including their dear Pietje and Ruff, the family dog. Peter remembers crying for days, a young child, inconsolable in his grief.

Placing the little boy on his knee, the Guardian smiles. “We must do all we can to keep our world safe. The children and my grandson, George, represent the hope of our future. I dream of the day when he will follow in my footsteps and become an influential leader when he grows up. We and all the people of Hopewell City, thank you in advance for putting yourself in a situation that might mean exposure to the Virus. Of course, I will grant you a promotion out of the energy division, give you a private suite, and appoint you to oversee the newly instituted music society.”

This generous offer astonishes Peter; it is more than he dreamed of as a reward. He vows to himself to accomplish the rescue of these precious birds and then to run and tell Johann of his good fortune.

“I will do it.”

Two guards escort him to the large private section that served as the wealthy woman’s domed aviary. The peach-faced birds are chirping and grooming each other’s emerald feathers as they cuddle

together on a branch high above. The massive ana tree, transported all the way from the African plains of Namibia, has lush blue green foliage which provides excellent cover for the pair.

As Peter plays his special haunting melody that charms animals, the lovebirds are silenced. The only sounds are flute music and then the fluttering of wings as the lovebirds descend to land gently on his shoulders. He stops to admire them, when suddenly guards throw a net over each bird and harshly seize the frightened creatures. The last image Peter sees is the lovely, treasured pets thrashing wildly in separate glass cages.

“Stop! They belonged to Mrs. Hopewell. Lovebirds mate for life; you can’t separate them!”

With a cruel chuckle, one guard scoffs. “Fool! They’ll both be dead in an hour and on the dissecting table.”

He falls to his knees in shock.

“Shut up about this operation,” warns the other guard, who noticed the look of horror on the young musician’s face. He faces the flutist. “You must tell no one about what you have seen or heard here.”

Peter nods numbly as they lead him back to his dorm.

The next day, Peter is summoned to the energy division office, where Ken, his supervisor, hands him a tablet with a text displayed. Cell phones have been forbidden and information is on a “need to know” basis for ordinary citizens. The message from the Guardian reads:

Peter, thank you for your service. Unfortunately, Mrs. Hopewell’s valuable birds had to be destroyed due to broken wings, and we cannot offer you that promised promotion. Carry on with your essential work in maintaining the energy supply we all need.

The tablet clatters to the ground, and Ken utters a cry of disgust for his carelessness. Peter feels only deep disappointment and simmering rage for the betrayal.

He returns to the factory floor with a dark countenance and feels a tug on his jacket sleeve. Peter looks down to see one of his favorites, Aisha, with her afro gathered back and a braid, with one blue bead in it, tucked behind her ear. She has the brightest smile for him, despite the hardship of working her fingers to the bone. Her little brown chapped hand surreptitiously slips something into his pocket.

“Will you play your flute for us tonight, Peter?”

He knows Ken is watching them from the second story office and kneels before the child.

“Yes, Aisha. I will come to your dorm to play your favorite tune. You can sing along about going over the rainbow.” She nods her head, then whispers, “It’s from my papa.”

She goes back to her station, and Peter, standing with his back turned to Ken, feels a scrap of paper in his pocket. He tries to keep the amazement from his face and can hardly wait until he can get back to his bunk that night to examine it. Communication in the city is electronic only, with daily announcements on display screens in the hallways. Paper is only for the elite. They have even taken all the books plus the sheet music and shredded them to pulp. All the words and notes were washed away. Then artisans fashioned recycled handmade pages and bound them together to create special notebooks; only the Guardian can use them to record his private journals.

The rest of Peter’s shift drags on and it is hard for him to concentrate on his work. His hand keeps going to his pocket to finger the strange feel of paper. It is only when he is alone in his bed that he allows himself to turn on the bunk-head light. Hands trembling, he unfolds the hand-written note and reads:

*Meet me in the Dining hall tomorrow at noon. Sit in far corner. Need help.
A desperate father*

Immediately, he destroys the missive, wadding it up into a mushy ball he will later take to the latrine. Sleep evades him as he mulls over what the meaning could be behind the cryptic invitation from Aisha’s father. How on earth did he get that tiny piece of paper? What kind of help could he offer to this anxious man?

The morning alarm sounds, but Peter does not feel rested. After tossing and turning all night, he gets up with a sense of apprehension and foreboding. He counts the hours until his lunch break and makes sure not to rush to the dining hall. Thankfully, a corner table is vacant, and Peter sets his food down with trepidation. A haggard-looking worker with worry lines creasing his brown face sits down across from him. Peter can see the resemblance to Aisha. The trays with MREs sit between them. The dehydrated meal of Southwest beef and black beans is in the original army plastic package; there is no more pretense that the workers will get anything fresh to eat from the hydroponic greenhouse with its aquaculture system.

While going through the motions of eating, the man speaks in hushed tones, “My name is Moses, and you supervise my daughter, Aisha. I worked with your parents – wonderful people. I miss them. We were like-minded about issues on how this place was being run. They would talk about the Before times and how proud they were of you and your amazing musical talent even as a young boy. Your dad would joke about falling asleep when you played that song by an old rock group called The Mamas and the Papas. It was called *California Dreamin’* and when you got to the flute interlude, they were out like a light.”

Peter chuckles softly at the memory of his snoring parents. “I miss them too.”

Moses lowers his voice even more. “I know that what I am about to tell you sounds like a drastic measure, but with how the Guardian is restricting our freedoms, time is of the essence. When my wife and I agreed to join this community, we assumed that he and his governing board would be democratic and open to validated scientific knowledge. Instead, over the years, the tyrant has done away with his cabinet, becoming autocratic and paranoid. He listens to advisors who know nothing of the environmental sciences and has been spouting misinformation. I fear the Guardian wants to keep us all in the Dome, paying homage to him as our wise supreme leader. It’s madness; the situation has become intolerable. Some parents who work in the tunnels have discovered a secret hatch to the Outside. We are planning to leave with our children.”

Peter’s twenty-year-old body stiffens at the thought of venturing out onto the devastated landscape of a climate savaged earth. Fifteen years ago, experts declared the noxious environment to be hazardous and people could only live in domes for the foreseeable future. Peter takes a deep breath. “How can you take the chance with your family?”

“I was a climatologist in my former life. I am still a scientist; it is my belief that since the Crisis has isolated polluters in their city domes, the environment has rested without the impact of carbon emissions. Nature is a powerful force when left on her own. I am quite certain that we can survive and thrive Outside. That is why I am willing to risk my life and the lives of my family.”

Peter shakes his head in amazement. Has the Guardian been deceiving us to serve his own ends? All these years and the Guardian has only cared about power?

“The guards must be asleep so we can take our children and make our escape. In time, the city will run out of food, so we want to make our own way on the land again. Our resistance group will need an energy source, so we also want to confiscate the gem reserve the miners worked so hard to amass. The parents plan to leave sufficient crystals in place to keep the city running for three months. We will post information on the screen displays to alert anyone else who wants to exit the dome before the ventilation system shuts down. Of course, those who remain could mine their own gems to keep the city going longer or just open the hatches and let the fresh air in.”

“Are there birds outside?”

Moses smiles at the unexpected question. “Yes, our scouts have been able to set up listening devices and mentioned hearing their twittering.”

He becomes serious. “Peter now comes the dangerous part of the plan. Your mother told me when you play the *California Dreamin’* piece of music, it seems to affect only adults. Once the guards are asleep, can you lead the children to freedom? Most of them know you and your bedtime tune *Over the Rainbow*. They will follow you to find those bluebirds who fly beyond the rainbow.”

With an exhale of breath and a nod, Peter says, “I will do it.”

After setting the date for Operation Rainbow, he must find a hiding place for his flute. A sympathetic guard hacks the intercom and Peter is ready at the appointed time to play the California tune over the broadcast system. Parents know to stuff cotton in their ears, but the officials, including Ken, fall like wheat before the threshing machine.

The frightened children look around at all the prone adults, mostly uniformed guards, and some staunch followers of the Guardian. Peter quickly switches to the Rainbow tune. The young ones calm down and hold hands, following the music. They swing their arms a little and Peter in front sways from side to side with his flute. Aisha giggles and shouts, "I know this game. My father taught me. It's follow the leader!" The message gets sent back along the line. Peter leads the way with a jaunty skip to let the children know this activity will be a fun game. He plays for their lives, following the map in his head to the tunnels, the escape hatch, and a whole new life. As he turns in a circle, the flash of a bright blue jacket catches his eye. The young grandson of the Guardian has joined the queue and is clasping Aisha's hand as they follow Peter together.

As they venture through the hatch, some kids jump up in the air or chase each other in the meadow, happy to have the space to play for the first time in their young lives. Children turn their faces to the sky, feeling the sunshine; they touch wildflowers and watch colorful butterflies in wonder. The birds chirp and adults open their arms to enfold the young ones. Tears flow, but there is laughter as well.

The last hopeful notes from the flute join the chorus of birdsong.

"A whole new world indeed, Guardian. Children are our hope, and we must keep this planet safe for them." Peter says aloud as they begin their freedom trek away from the doomed city.

From somewhere behind him, he hears a soft and familiar voice.

"We knew you would play your flute for us. It was not just the children that needed to hear your music."

Hope surges in his heart as Peter turns to see a face he loved many years ago and thought he had lost.