

Themis

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Arts and Sciences of the University of St. Thomas
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts in English

by

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May 2021

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Prospectus

Writing is a practice that mixes technical and artistic elements in its execution. Like any artistic medium, the primary prevailing rule is that what the writer does must work. What is written must be vivid, convincing, and engaging because without these elements a story will not be appealing to a reader. In the course of my thesis's execution, I transitioned from writing memoir to fiction. However, it was not a smooth transition.

I had first wanted to do field writing for my senior thesis project. I had intended to venture into the wilderness of a national park and write based off of my experiences. Unfortunately, with the advent of this pandemic, travel was restricted and my anxieties surrounding my health grew. So I had to go back to the drawing board and rethink my project. After some time I settled on writing a series of memoirs about my childhood imagination. I wanted to try using this project as a way to analyze my old self through the eyes of my current self. Now, this originally seemed like it would yield some more positive results, but I found myself unable to tell a proper story. This semester I learned that writing memoir requires you to dig into more raw aspects of yourself in order for the writing to be authentic and engaging. However, with these stories I was unable to dig into these aspects of myself. Rather, when I wrote these pieces, they were vague and shallow, often filled with last-ditch efforts to tell a cohesive narrative. Overall the product was miserable and becoming a drain. So, halfway through my project timeline, I decided to ditch for a more favorable concept: fiction.

The author of fiction knows that it is the lie that tells the truth. This is because fiction will always tie back into the 'real' world either because it is rooted in events that took place in it or makes commentary on the 'real' world. In this way, fiction has this same aspect of digging into the raw for your writing. However, another thing I learned is that when I am telling a story, most

of the time it is the story that moves me, and not me that moves the story. Though this line of thought applies to most writers, it especially applies to me. Looking back on this semester, I see that this was another distinction between my memoir attempt and my finished fiction piece. The narrative of my fiction piece flowed much more smoothly and was overall much more strong. I was actually able to use the vivid, direct, and efficient language I had been taught to use through my four years of study in the English Department, back from when I was just a Creative Writing minor.

I started my English degree here as a Creative Writing minor. I wanted to learn how to tell stories and was informed that I should pursue the minor. After my first Creative Writing course I fell in love with the course structure and wanted more of it, eventually deciding to change my major to English with a Concentration in Writing. And it was worth it. Even though I still have to make several rewrites to my written work before it is satisfactory, I learned how to get it there, and rewriting is just another step in the writing process.

This narrative you are about to read, titled *Themis*, is the culmination of what I've learned throughout my years here at UST. More than just what I learned through my English department courses, I have incorporated elements from my core and elective courses, as well as my social and professional experiences here. While reading I would also like you to note the meaning of the name of the piece as well as the names of some of our characters. I hope you have as much fun reading this piece as I had writing it.

Themis

Prologue: The Situation

“I hate dissections,” I croak out as I pull away from the lab table, covering my mouth and nose with my forearm.

My lab partner darts her eyes to me without turning away from the black cat splayed out in front of us. “Themis. You do realize that as a biology pre-med student you’ll have to do these *quite* often, right?” She cuts her scalpel into the sternum.

My shoulders jump up as I hear the skin split open. “I just . . .” I utter as I try not to breathe in the formaldehyde, “. . . hate the smell.”

She hesitates. “Come on.” Moving out of the way, she sets the scalpel down on the dissection tray. “If you finish this cut, I’ll do the rest of them.” I take one last look at the poor thing, noting the white patches on its paws and chest. I take the scalpel and cut.

As soon as the dissection lab is done I find myself on the floor of one of the pre-med center’s stalls, holding my upper body up just enough to hang my head over the toilet bowl. The cold of the floor tiles helps calm me, but I lose most of my lunch to uneasiness anyway.

It isn’t enough that I hate handling dead bodies—there’s just something about the stiff lifelessness of a corpse that’s deeply unsettling—but the preservatives always get to me.

I spend the next hour trying to recover. After the tiles are as warm as my legs I decide to pull myself off the floor, my entire body shaking and weak to the point that only the little support my arms provide just barely manages to pull me up.

I hobble over to the sink by leaning into the wall, reinvigorating myself with the coolness of its tiles. *Tiles are so refreshing*, I think to myself. I get to the sink and am recovered enough to stand without added support. I slightly bend my upper body over the counter and turn the faucet to run cold water over my hands. I pump some hand soap out from the wall dispenser and lather up, rubbing the backs, fingers, and every crevice along my hands' surfaces. I start working the soap up my forearms, adding more as I go, and decide to rinse off after they're completely covered in foam. I then cup my hands in the sink and use the water to wathe leftover tastes of regurgitated food and bile out my mouth. Finally, I wash my face, giving myself the last edge I need to move on with my day.

Six thirty, my watch says.

I need food again, my stomach groans.

Then maybe don't lose an entire day of food, huh? I respond.

... I'm talking to myself, I definitely need food.

After fetching my backpack from outside the anatomy lab, I head down the long staircases and march myself to the café. Dinner has just been set out so there are many daily specials to choose from, but I opt for my comfort food: Mac N' Cheese with mixed-in beef and miscellaneous fruits on the side. I decide to get two servings of fruit to try and off-set what I lost to the restroom and head to the check-out. After properly setting my food onto a tray, I grab a fork and napkins on my way.

After paying with my meal plan, I walk over to the cafeteria and sit at a booth meant for four people, setting my backpack down in the space next to me.

I take my fork off of the tray and dig it into the macaroni. *No meat*. I'm disappointed as I shovel out a gleaming pile of sauced noodles. I eat a few elbows from the pile, testing them to

make sure I won't become nauseated. They settle into my stomach without issue so I continue eating. I'm halfway through the macaroni when I decide to eat the first fruit bowl. It goes down well and the rest of the meal is uneventful. I put my tray and dishes in the return slot and head to the restroom to wash my hands again.

As I dry off my hands I notice a fifty on my watch. *Six fifty? There's no way that only took twenty minutes . . .* then it hits me. I pull my wrist up to my face and staring back at me is a seven. It's seven fifty. I spent an *hour* eating. I'm an hour and a half behind schedule. This means I'll have to take a short-cut back to my dorm through my least favorite part of campus.

First: The Setting

I hate walking this way.

I glide down the main road, trying not to draw attention to myself. I've only gone through this pathway three times before. The first was a mistake; I had thought I could use this route as a way to cut on time when I need to go to class and decided to try it on a Tuesday afternoon on my way to get dinner. It was a straight shot: a sort of alley-like street behind a mix of repurposed and still lived-in houses, completely isolated by the tall, opaque fences enclosing their yards. I saw security cameras peeking out from all directions, but didn't mind them. After all, they were a normal part of campus. But, after five steps down the way I felt something staring at me. At first I assumed I was just suddenly bothered by the cameras for no reason so I kept walking normally. Then the feeling got worse. Something really was staring at me with its own eyes, but the feeling was absolutely terrible: it made my entire back tense up, sending repeated chills across my skin to the point the texture of my cotton shirt became abrasive. Halfway down the street I still felt

that pair of eyes on me, but couldn't identify where it was coming from. I couldn't turn my head and just moving my eyes to look at the surrounding area didn't help. At this point I was already moving fast and the panic setting in prompted me to run as fast as I could.

Once I was back onto the main road the feeling disappeared. I took one look back into the alleyway but saw nothing.

The second time I came here was the night after to investigate. I couldn't focus on my homework because I had to know more about what happened the night before.

I got to the entrance and did my best to catch every detail. First, I looked up. I noticed signs, alerting me to the presence of the cameras I'd noticed the last time I was here. *Fun*. I breathed in deep, exhaled sharp, and confidently walked forward. It didn't take long for me to feel that dreaded sensation again, but this time it burned. I was sweating and shaking, but I stood my ground. I looked above the fences, at the roofs of the houses, on the streetlights and powerlines. After five minute-long seconds I finally saw a shadow move across the powerlines to my left but didn't catch the full shape.

At least it didn't look very big.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

My observations meant whatever it was that had been staring at me this whole time wasn't nearly as much of a threat as it felt. I went back to my room and resumed my regularly scheduled night of study.

The next evening I decided to cut across campus using the alleyway, but as soon as I got to it I felt the eyes on me again. This time I was ready for it, but it hit me harder than before. I was frozen in place. Stuck right at the entrance. Eventually the burning gaze thawed me out enough to move, but only backwards. I decided never to return again, but here I am now.

Second: The Foundling

I take my first step: slow and unsure. I wait for that dreaded feeling to wash over me, but it doesn't. I take a few more hesitant steps, but halfway down, I feel the gaze on me again. Something feels different about it. It's softer, weaker. I can't help but try to find where it's coming from.

I walk through the alleyway, scouring every inch up and down. My eyes land on a bush I hadn't noticed before. It shakes just enough to make sound and I move the branches to see the cause.

In the base of the bush is an orange cat sprawled on her side. It's too dark to see any pattern, but there is a kitten curled up against her belly. It looks to be the size of my hand, and it isn't moving.

The mother looks up, her green eyes directing the far too familiar gaze at me. I flinch back out of my newly formed habit, but her eyes are strangely calming.

Why.

I realize she must be hurt. I grab a sweater out of my backpack and carefully wrap up both the mother and kitten. I pick them up and run to my room.

I burst into the room while my roommate is eating ramen.

“Sorry, what?” she gets out through the slightly curled noodles hanging from her mouth.

I'm panting hard, the cats weigh down on my arms so I put them on my desk.

My roommate slurps up the noodles that were hanging from her mouth moments before.

“What the heck is that?”

I unwrap the cats in a delicate manner, making sure they don't move any more than needed.

“I was beginning to think this might never happen,” she says while setting down the cheap wax paper cup she was eating from.

“What do you mean,” I reply without looking away from the cats.

She walks up next to me before responding. “Bringing in animals from off the street. I thought you would have done this months ago, even though it's against dorm policy.”

“What do you *mean*?” I turn my face toward hers to pressure her to get to the point.

“Uhm . . . have you seen the way you look at animals?”

“Most people can't see themselves in general, Vanessa.” I look back at the cats and notice they're both breathing, but they don't seem to be doing much better. “Can you help me take them to a vet?”

She pauses for a few moments. “Sure, but I'm just going to drive us there. You'll carry them yourself.”

“Got it.” I nod.

I dump my school supplies out of my backpack onto my bed and grab some blankets from my drawer to softly swaddle the cats in them before putting them in my bag. The mother slightly opens her eyes in response, but doesn't seem to mind. She closes them again, nuzzling herself to the kitten.

I zip my bag closed and carefully put it over my shoulders.

“Ready?” Vanessa confirms.

I pat my pockets. “Yup! Let’s go before things get worse.”

We glide down the hall to an elevator. Vanessa requests it with the push of a button and we get on. Luckily there’s no one else in it and our journey to the first floor is uneventful.

The elevator dings and we step out into the lobby. The only visible challenge is getting past the front desk. Fortunately, the desk worker is completely lost in his phone so the stress creeping down my back is for nothing.

We get into the car and I unzip my bag to check on the cats. They’re still breathing heavily, but at least it’s steady. “How long until we get there?”

“It’s going to be about ten minutes. Think they’ll make it?” Vanessa responds.

I pause for a few moments. “I think so. Let’s just get there.”

The trip is a smooth blur from then on. We pull into the parking lot and up to the door. The dark gray building is barely visible against the light polluted sky. The door on the other hand is brightly lit glass, telling me exactly where to go.

“I’m gonna let you out here and follow you after parking,” Vanessa notes.

I nod a few times, clutching my bag with my arms to hold it against my body. “Got it.”

Vanessa opens the door and I jump out, landing in a run. I get to the door and it opens for me, letting me get to the receptionist.

“Hi!” I puff. “I found these cats on the road. Can I get them checked out?” I smile, trying to seem nice enough to garner serious consideration.

She stares at me with eyes that can never recover from the workday. “Sure, honey. Can you fill out these forms?” She pulls out a clipboard with papers on it.

I rest my eyes on the clipboard for a few moments, not sure what to do about it.

“Oh, you poor thing, lemme take that bag for you.” She comes around the desk and softly takes the bag from me, enveloping it in her much more sizable arms. She then shoos me to the waiting area saying, “Go fill out those papers . . . now.” She peeks at the cats through the zipper. “I’m going to go ahead and have these poor babies looked at right away,” she softly shakes out on her way to the exam rooms. “I’ll come get you as soon as the cats are out of the bag and being examined!”

I look around the lobby, finally able to pay attention to my surroundings. It’s so bright, lit up by wall lights and a simple, cubic chandelier. The walls, ceiling, and floor are a plain off-white, contrasting with the charcoal and black woven patterns of the firmly cushioned seats and solid black coffee table. As I draw close I notice some animal welfare magazines scattered on it. I look down at the clipboard in my hand. I don’t remember when I got it, but I notice it has two forms clipped on: an intake form and a . . . *wildlife intake information sheet*? I look at the details and it says it’s for the clinic’s records in case anything happens with the wild animals we bring in.

Before I can properly continue my thoughts a wave of tiredness washes over me. I start to lose focus, but manage to sit down and get through both of the forms.

I hear the door to the exam rooms open, snapping me back awake. “Honey! Come back here.” The receptionist beckons me further with her hand.

I glide up to her, following behind as we move through the slightly manila hall. After a left and right turn we land at a charcoal door with a small window. “I want you to be aware that the mother might not make it; she seems to be fading by the minute.” The words connect in my head. The receptionist had told me them on the way, but they didn’t form a sentence until just now. I seem to be getting weaker like the cat, but I know my life isn’t on the line.

She opens the door and we go inside. I see the mother and her kitten still nestled into each other, but the mother is hooked up to an intravenous solution. “What’s going on?”

The vet turns to me, upbeat yet slightly agitated. “Are you the one that brought these two in?”

I slightly nod in response.

“Okay, okay.” He calms himself down a bit. “Did you see anything wrong with them in particular?”

“No . . . they just seemed lethargic.” I drawl out.

“Very funny,” he responds. “Anywho . . .” he sombers again. “The mother seems to have . . . accepted death, to say the least. She’s largely unresponsive, refuses to eat, and threw up when we managed to get something in her mouth. I mean . . . when she came in she was very thin. Her fur was faded and . . . she probably gave more to her litter than she could afford. Were there others?”

I stare softly at him. “No.”

“I see . . . she’s been in this state since, her breathing and pulse just getting weaker.” He gestures to the cats. “The child on the other hand, seems to just be sleeping.”

I walk up to the exam table. “She’s going to die soon, isn’t she?”

“Yes, I think in the next few minutes.” The vet responds. “Do you want to sit here for a bit or wait outside?” He gestures to the door still being held open by the receptionist.

I look up at the vet. “I want to be here when she passes.”

I lose track of the time it takes for her body to stop breathing, but a burning wave of water moves through me, falling out of my eyes. I drop to the floor, again feeling a slight relief from the cool tile, but it’s not enough. I see no justice in her death. I think about how she must

have had a whole litter she lost to the elements and predators, fighting the hardest she could for the sake of her kittens, but still losing them until she had one left. I think about how she must have given more than she had just to keep this last little one alive. *Where is . . .*

“Themis!” I hear Vanessa shout from the door. I slightly turn toward her at the sound of my name, but my expression doesn’t change. “I’m so sorry,” she says with soft eyes as she kneels next to me and wraps her arms around my shoulders.

I continue crying for some time after.

I can’t take the body of the mother, but the receptionist offers me the option to have her buried in a pet cemetery the clinic has.

“I know we don’t normally do this, but it feels right,” I remember the receptionist saying before I leave.

Vanessa and I get in the car to head back to campus with our new kitten and supplies. The vet had made me name her before we left. I decided to call her Diké, after the Ancient Greek word for justice, thinking back to how it was a sort of *twisted* justice that I found her the day I dissected a cat. He could have been her father for all I knew. We also loaded up on formula, kitten food, and other supplies before leaving. “She should be ready for kitten food in about a week though, so don’t worry about getting any more.” I remember the vet saying as he gave us the supplies.

“Well . . . I guess we have a cat now? How are we gonna keep this a secret from ResLife?” Vanessa wonders.

“We’ll worry about that when we need to. All that matters is that she’s going to be okay.”

I look down at Diké and she slightly opens her eyes. They’re the same piercing green as her mother’s, but it doesn’t scare me like before.

Third: The Secret

Health and safety checks are just around the corner. Staff are going to key in at random to see if we have anything banned from the halls, which cats definitely are. Luckily, Diké is a quiet cat. She prefers climbing up to the minishelf on my desk and staring at the room, using the chair as a step when I’m not there to help, just how I imagine her mother was as a kitten.

Unfortunately, she is a bright orange, and given her preference in seating location, she will probably be seen.

“What are we going to do about health and safety checks?” Vanessa asks me.

“I was just thinking about that. Do you think we could have her sit on the top shelf of the closet and she won’t be seen?”

I raise my hand to my face, making the ever-typical thinking pose. “I think that would work! Diké is too small to jump down and if we put things between her and the edge of the shelf, there’s no way she would be seen!” Diké is also a quiet cat, so the plan seems fool-proof.

“But what do we do about her food and litter box? We can’t really hide those the same way, right?” Vanessa retorts, reminding me of the fact that there’s much more to taking care of a cat than the cat itself; there are supplies.

“I have an idea.”

I end up emptying and storing her litter box in my drawers everytime I leave the room, hiding her bag of kitten food in Vanessa's drawers. I also remember to leave her food and water bowls on the shelf with her so she can eat and drink if needed. Unfortunately, I'm only able to think of using paper towels for her to leave waste on, so Vanessa and I make sure not to leave the room for too long.

"We only have two more days, right?" Vanessa asks while reading from her History textbook.

"Until what?" I respond, looking up from my phone.

"Until health and safety checks are over. Then we're good!" she says while looking up from the book.

"Yeah . . . is something wrong?" I set my phone down in case it's serious.

"Did you notice your clothes are starting to smell?"

I stare, eyes unfocused while the rest of my head starts to float toward whatever she could mean.

"Like, they don't smell *bad*, but they definitely smell *weird*. Even mine are starting to smell like Diké's kibble. I'm just glad we aren't going to have to worry about that for much longer," she finishes, yanking my head back into place from her textbook.

I pull the collar of my shirt up to my nose. I regret it immediately and resign to wash my clothes and store them in my laundry basket for the next two days.

The next morning Vanessa and I are sitting in our room, scrolling through our phones before heading to English.

Three knocks hit the door. "ResLife! Health and safety checks!"

“Wait, I’m naked!” Vanessa shouts before jumping out of her bed to put Diké’s food away.

“Okay, tell us when you’re dressed!”

I empty Diké’s litter box, triple bagging the contents and putting them all away. Then I grab Diké off of my desk where she was sleeping, warranting a growl. I put her on the closet shelf, behind the snacks I keep up there and hope she won’t make any noise.

One of the Residence Life workers knocks on the door again. “Are you dressed yet?”

“Just gotta put on my shirt!” Vanessa responds without pause. “I’ll open the door when I’m ready!” She looks at me and asks me a thumbs up.

I look around the room and don’t see anything wrong, so I answer a thumbs up.

Vanessa pulls up her shirt a bit as she walks up to the door. She opens it with one hand and pulls her shirt back down with the other.

Three people are standing on the other side of the door. The middle one, an RA I’ve seen around the halls, has a clipboard and pen in his hands. “Sorry to bother you, but we need the two of you to come to the door here so we can properly examine your room for safety hazards and banned items.”

I feel a hot shiver spike up my back. He shouldn’t have been able to tell I was in the room. I hadn’t made any noise and I was barely visible. Did he see me when I looked at him? Maybe, but I slowly step out from the shadows. I get a better look at all three of them as they stand there. The RA is small and unassuming; his posture is more proper yet demure and with a more clean and crisp style. The two staff workers flanking him are unremarkable.

Vanessa and I walk up to the doorway and the three workers walk into the room.

The RA, who I assume must have seniority, looks like he's training the other two in how to do these checks. He lets them do most of the looking, only taking notes after they tell him something or ask him something else. Their voices are hushed, making it impossible for me to understand them.

I look at Vanessa and see her calm yet purposely tired stance. She has no signs of stress, unlike me. She reaches her hand out to mine. I take it and breathe deep to try to calm down, becoming a bit light-headed in the process. It works and before I know it, the workers come back out from the room.

"You two go on ahead to the next room, I'll be with you in a moment," the main worker says. Then, turning to us, "Here you go." He hands us a sheet of paper. "You passed!"

I want to feel relieved but something tells me I shouldn't.

"However . . ."

He knows.

"There were some things we noticed that were concerning, so you will be having a meeting with your RA. Understood?" he finishes with a soft and scary professionalism.

"Yes, of course!" Vanessa says while pulling me back into the room. "Have a nice day!" She closes the door with an energetic thud.

"Do you think we're in trouble?" I ask, tensing up again.

"No, no." Vanessa shakes her head. "He would have been more explicit if that was the case. But I have to wonder."

A week later Vanessa and I find ourselves in our RA's room for the meeting. From what I remember she's an Economics major who's an art hobbyist. It's pretty obvious from her room

that she likes art more than economics: everything is swimming in color. She has a tapestry on each wall: the one in front of me is blue and orange tie-dye and the one on my right is a green-theme mandala, the other two being just out of sight, though I can see the purple edges of both of them. She has paintings set up in every section of the walls the tapestries don't cover, most abstract mixes of contrasting colors.

I don't like it. It's too chaotic. I try to instead focus on the plush textures of her carpet with my feet, letting the simple complexities of the fibers take me with them.

"So, congratulations on getting away with keeping a cat in your dorm! The two of you are *very* good at hiding things," the RA opens.

Fourth: Therapy

"Unfortunately, you're not quite good enough," she continues.

I am thoroughly confused. Where is she going to take this conversation? Is this even a conversation? Or am I going to just sit here and listen.

"See, everything makes a smell, whether you like it or not." She looks directly at me. "I'll let you in on a little secret. The nose is an RA's greatest tool. If we can smell it, we know it's there." She shifts in her seat enough to make noise. "Marshall, the RA that led your health and safety check, told me that he smelled cat musk and cat litter. Now he didn't smell anything worse than that—thank God—but that, coupled with the reports from his accompanying office workers of a 'being watched' feeling that wasn't quite human, means that you guys definitely had or have a cat in your room."

"I-" Vanessa starts.

She puts her left hand up. "You will not say anything. The both of you passed the health and safety check, and as far as Residence Life is aware, there are no unauthorized pets in that room. However . . ." She puts her hand back down. "If there are any we didn't catch, I would recommend that you get the said pet certified as an Emotional Support Animal (ESA) before it gets found out."

We sit there as her words settle.

"Is there anything else?" Vanessa asks.

"No!" She breathes. "You can go now . . . and you should! I have Econ Stats homework to take care of!" She turns away, rolling to her purple mandala tapestries.

Vanessa and I stand up to walk out.

Then the RA rolls back into view. "And open your window more often! It'll help with the smell!"

We leave the room.

"So, we're not in trouble!" Vanessa says once we're back in our room.

"But we will be," I respond, for some reason only able to focus on the negative possibilities.

"Say, Themis. Have you ever been to a therapist?" Vanessa interrupts my train of thought while opening our small window.

"No . . . why?"

"Okay, let's go back a bit. Do you know what an Emotional Support Animal is?"

"No . . . am I supposed to?"

"Not necessarily." She looks me up and down. "An Emotional Support Animal, or ESA for short—as the RA mentioned—is an animal certified by way of a prescription from a mental

health professional.” She pauses, noting a sense of confusion in my eyes. “Basically, if you can get a properly licensed therapist to say an animal companion is healthy for you, it becomes an ESA. And since ESAs are a type of service animal, Residence Life can’t get you in trouble for having one as long as you show them the proof.”

“Is that what the RA was getting at?”

“Exactly! And I think you should go see a therapist.” She shifts tone to be more serious. “And not just because of Diké. You need the help. Let’s schedule an appointment for you right now.”

“Wait, why?”

She holds herself for a few moments, locking her eyes with mine. “You are an individual that is falling apart at every turn. You let any stressful situation take you over and you don’t know how to relax.”

I stare back for a few moments, unsure what to respond with.

“And you know how stressful the situation with Diké has been, right?”

I nod slightly.

“She’s been the only thing that can calm you down when you start getting pent up about schoolwork or whatever is going on between you and your family. Have you noticed how all she needs to do is walk up to you and you suddenly calm down? No . . . ? Okay, let’s get this appointment scheduled.” Vanessa has me open my computer and guides me through the insurance loopholes until we find a provider that’s authorized to prescribe treatment.

“Wow, a month. That’s pretty fast!”

“A month is fast?”

“Yeah, you’re lucky to get an appointment in three.”

Over the next month I bide my time, focusing on my schoolwork and thinking about my conversation with Vanessa. One night I'm writing an English paper and I can't seem to get past the second page and my frustration builds, only to give way to panic. The banging on my keyboard changes to a faster clacking as I write and rewrite the same sentence over again, hoping it'll somehow be different. My hands shake more each time, my back threatening to become sore.

Then my hands are blanketed by a fuzzy warmth. I snap out of it to notice Diké resting on my hands. She isn't looking at me; she seems to have chosen my hands as her new perch to watch the room.

I feel my eyes start to close and look at the clock on my computer screen. "2:07 AM . . . that's late . . ."

I wake up at nine the next day, seeing my hands are free again. My laptop has been placed closed on my desk and Diké is sitting on it as her perch. She turns toward me and steps off the laptop, jumping lightly back up to the minishelf. I take it as a hint to check on my paper and realize my next step, finishing the assignment by ten. Just in time for class. I pet Diké on my way out, and go through the rest of my day without much trouble.

On the day of my appointment, I feel anxious again. I'm unsure what will happen.

"I've done my research, but the limited information I got from other people's testimonies can't determine what will happen in my own experience." I say while on my way to the appointment.

"What do you mean?" Vanessa responds.

"I've been thinking a lot about what's gonna happen at the appointment, but when I try to research, I normally turn up very limited insights."

Vanessa looks at me for a moment before turning back to the road. “I know not every therapist is the same, but I looked at this one’s reviews and she seems to be legit. Plus, she’ll be able to help you out.”

I turn my attention back to Diké, petting her soft orange fur.

I sit in the firm armchair after having filled out my intake forms.

The therapist pipes up, “How are you?”

“I’m okay. How’re you?”

“I’m rather well today. I had a good breakfast and walked my dog earlier . . . so what brings you in today?”

“Well, my roommate Vanessa told me I should come.” I grip my knees with my hands, not sure what else to do.

“I see. Did she say why?”

“Well.” I look around the room, feeling a bit uncomfortable in the intentionally dim light. “I think . . . she told me . . . it’s because I seem to have a hard time managing stress.”

The therapist leans forward. “Seem to?”

“I mean . . . she said I let stressful situations take over . . .”

“And?”

“And I don’t know how to relax,” I laugh.

“And why do you think she’s telling you this now?”

I pause, reaching my forefinger up to my lips. “So, I recently took in a cat whose mom died . . . but since I live in the dorms on campus I’m not allowed to have her there and the RAs know we have a cat in the room, but they didn’t report me.”

“They didn’t report you?”

“Yeah, they didn’t actually find her so I guess they had no reason to?”

“Did they say anything else about the cat?”

“Well, when we were . . . technically . . . found out, my RA said something about making the cat an Emotional Support Animal.”

“I see.” She shifts back in her seat. “Well, I can’t make this cat one unless I see there’s good reason for me to think that she is beneficial to your well-being. Is she?”

I think back through the past month. “Yes.”

“Continue.”

“Vanessa said she has a calming effect on me, but I don’t even know how she does it. I didn’t even notice it until after Vanessa pointed it out! She can just catch me slipping, but next thing I know she’s sitting with me and I’m so much more calm.”

“Sounds like you’ve had some time to get to know her. Did you give her a name?”

“Diké.”

“That’s a beautiful name.” She smiles softly.

We continue the conversation. She has us review my intake forms, prompting me to talk about my relationship with my family, my classes, my experience adapting to college, and before I notice, we’ve gone through fifty minutes. I only notice the passage of time because after my last point she interrupts while looking at her watch.

“We’re running out of time, Themis. Now, while I can’t make Diké an ESA quite yet, I think we definitely should meet again soon. Do you have any availability in the next two weeks?”

“Yes!”

“Great! How’s next Tuesday at 9:00 AM?”

“I’m free then.”

“See you then, Themis.”

I get up to leave, feeling awkward on my legs. “See you then!” As I walk out I remember the waves of anxiety my body was swimming through while recounting the past few months to the therapist. But, I feel lighter now.

“How was it?” Vanessa asks me once I get into her car.

“It was good.”

“You think it’s gonna help you?” Diké climbs out of the back seat into my lap.

I smile a bit in response. “Yeah, I think it’s all gonna be great.”