"There's so much he's lost to ash, there's so much he's lost to flames. He doesn't know how it started, he just knows what was never his, and what he will never have again."

Five things Gale Hawthorne has lost to fire, and the one thing that wouldn't burn.

Author Notes:

We all know there's a chance that Gale went to District 2 to form a band called Bastille, and that "Things we lost to the fire" is kind of the anthem of GK. What I'm trying to say is I've had this idea for a long time, and I've always loved making fics that list things, so I sat down to write the idea this past week after I posted my Peeta Character Study called A Chronicle of Lies. Gale's head is a risky place and I was very scared of going into it, but Kathleen over at tumblr was my cheerleader and so, now I have this and I'm making another one-shot character study of Katniss as a companion to this one and Peeta's. Katniss' character study will be part three of my Statesman/Symbol/Soldier series of one-shots. The OT3 that I deserved.

I hope you enjoy this and if you want to comment here, or in A Chronicle of Lies, please feel free. Kudos are also welcome.

PS. I'm bluesravenboyss over at tumblr, in case any of you want to say hi.

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I call myself fool
Say this good hearts
you give, God, you give
I'm neither hero nor monster.
You gave me permission for what I am

- Wait,
  by

Jeanann Verlee and Carlos Andrés Gómez

Things lost to the flames
(and the one thing that didn't burn)

(prologue)

On the fifth anniversary of peace, some genius somewhere decides to make coverages and documentaries about the 76 years of Snow’s dictatorship over Panem. The documentaries air at four different hours of the day: in the morning, at noon, in the afternoon and at midnight, just in case you missed the homages on your workday! They are completely optional, of course; they spend a lot of time making that disclaimer when the advertisements and billboards are put along the railroad tracks in every District he's positioned, because no— no one is forcing anyone to watch the wretched beginnings of Panem, now. No, no— this is a brand new world where everyone is born free.

Still, Gale thinks all of it is pointless; five years isn’t enough time to ‘miss’ or forget horrors and tragedies the population lived with their own skin. He doesn't need reminding of his own past. He does that very well himself every night in his own dreams.

He doesn't plan on it, see, and that's the problem, although in retrospect it shouldn't be that surprising to him at all. But when he gets to his white-walled apartment forty five minutes after
midnight after a long shift, there's a strange pull that beckons him to turn on the projector, and
suddenly, his 23 years of age start mounting up one on top of the other to make him twice as older
than when he woke up that morning and he feels so old, so ancient and alone that what if he has
indeed forgotten it all? He closes his eyes and before he can rethink it there's some blonde on the
screen talking about tesserae, and fences, and, fires and mockingjays, mockingjays.

In retrospect, no, it shouldn't be surprising. It's always a mockingjay making him watch
something.

He unlaces his boots and throws off his jacket and thinks this is so stupid, he knows the story
damn well. But there’s something about knowing he can turn off this projector any time he wishes
to that makes this kind of torture compelling and pliable, and besides he might see her; which is a
thing he both dreads and wants.

When the documentaries make the contrasts between the rebuilding being made on District 12 and
juxtapose it to how it was before, he feels his gut pressing up against his spine with an anger that
feels as old as life itself. He pauses and plays the footage over the refurbishing of the town square
where he stood once every year and he knows there are flowers blooming there now; he can see
them on the screen. There are monuments being made, and green, so much green space around a
gazebo that looks displaced, but all he can really see over that whole town is ash. Ash that burned
his lungs, charcoal that stuck to his skin, black smoke that bathed the 900 people walking scared
outside the fence with bomb sirens wailing at their backs.

There's so much he's lost to ash, there's so much he's lost to flames. He doesn’t know how it
started, he just knows what was never his, and what he will never have again.

I.

curio

noun /ˈkərɪəʊ/ /ˈkyərɪəʊ/

a small and unusual object that is considered interesting or attractive.

It seems rather absurd now, but there was a time when Gale was a child, and smiles that reached
his eyes came more often even if they were still a revelation whenever they occurred. There was a
time when Gale Hawthorne’s world was still relatively new, and hunger and struggle were still
malleable concepts instead of the constant reality of his every thought.

It seems even more absurd to think that this child, this Gale child, played with anything that didn't
require ropes and fancy knots to trap a beast in place, but see, this Gale child also had things like a
father, and one younger baby brother, which means there was a taut playfulness inside that house
sometimes, even if the circumstances were precarious. Two bashful boys playing on too-short legs
with baubles and trinkets made of scraps his father sometimes found on his way home from the
mines. It was a game, actually, a harmless one. One where he and Rory would mix and match the
items depending on colors, sizes and shapes to make them look like something else — a tree, a
bird, a house, imaginations running wild.

What isn't remotely absurd, though, is that this is still Gale Hawthorne, and this is still District 12,
a place where winters have gnarly sharp teeth and snow is thicker than brittle bones, and two days too soon four people in his small shack for home are in need to light fires to keep out the unforgiving cold.

His father does the best he can; he shows up a little bit later from his shift down the mines with a bag that looks too heavy on his shoulders, so heavy that even though he's young, Gale notices the shape of coal blocks against the bottom of the leather weighing his father down. Hazelle brings out rags of old clothes to throw into the improvised fireplace, but there isn't enough kindling, and Rory starts crying a wailing sound that doesn't seem like his baby voice at all.

His father starts throwing into the flames some of the wood they will need the next morning to make meals, and Hazelle gathers old school books, and paper and precious fabric she tries to convince herself that she won't need, but it's still a long night, and Rory keeps crying and the tips of his fingers are a little blue, Gale thinks. There are concerned adult faces exchanging glances and of course Gale catches them, because perhaps he never had a chance to be young at all.

Maybe it is then that Gale understands what it means to be older, what it means to be him in a world that asks something of you in order to give something back, maybe he looks at his parents trying and failing, yet trying with all their might, and he decides to try too. Maybe it's that, or maybe it's not, but he goes to the table near his bed where he stashes all the treasures his father has been bringing home for months, and they don't look like trees, or birds or houses, not anymore. They are just insignificant pieces of stone, some pieces of wood, useless metal that melts; they are just kindle... gasoline. They are now the answer to a problem, and not imaginative artifacts after all.

It takes a few hours for Rory to get warm, but Gale looks at his dad, and at his mom, and at his now empty bedside table, and a smile forms on his mouth anyway.

There's nothing absurd about this Gale at all.

II.

*patriarch*

noun /ˈpeɪtrɪɑrk/

the male head of a family or tribal line.

The truth is, Gale can't remember where he was when the mines exploded. Gale can't remember what he was wearing, or whether he was at school or someplace else when he got the news. He can't even remember what day it was, or how old he was, and it's funny because he is told these last two things about himself years later after the war has supposedly been won, on documentaries that detail Soldier Hawthorne's background as if his life is an amalgam of curiosities, and facts: District 12 had a prominent mine explosion on a hot day in May just when Gale Hawthorne was only thirteen years old.

In these same documentaries his father gets reduced to a sentence; an afterthought, one pre-requisite in order to talk about something else. For the rest of the world his father is item number one on a long list of things that amounted to the boy who became the mockingjay's right hand
while saving the world. But Gale’s father was so much more than that. His father was a man who knew how to love, a man with strained muscles, a sore back, chapped hands from working until his callouses bled, and endless lullabies sang to his wife’s round belly every night. Gale’s was a father who knew how to laugh in the midst of chaos; that’s the thing about him Gale remembers most and because of this, he has always thought his father was a man so unlike him that he can’t decide if his personality was cemented the way it was because he didn’t have him, or if he learned to be angry at how the world worked because he did.

Gale can’t remember the minutia of his father’s death, but he does remember the crying. He does remember going home and seeing Vick and Rory’s thick dirty tears rolling infinitely down their cheeks, and feeling a hole so empty in his midriff that it kneeled him to the foot of their beds wordlessly. Innocence makes no sound as it breaks in half, so he keeps quiet through his pain, but he remembers the pressure and the force of Vick and Rory’s heads as they rattled with sobs against his chest. He remembers the quietness in his own breath, and the gash he left in his own tongue just to keep from screaming and waking half the block with a raw cry that would never end.

He remembers, hours later, how Hazelle plucked the boys from his arms that night and laid them on their beds, completely spent, eyes swollen from salt and grief that knew no bounds; how she commanded force from where there was none, the bulging in her belly not stopping her in the slightest, and hauled him from his knees, shoulders first into her arms.

And after that, all he remembers is the crying. The holding on to someone’s body as if they are a saving mast in the middle of the sea; splintered and broken but there floating on, and holding on and carrying you to safe port, and that mast was Hazelle. That was his mother, with her own special brand of grief holding on to this boy who would be a boy no longer, who cried for his innocence as much as his father’s demise.

She tells him We’re going to be okay, Gale, and he hears the unspoken I’m sorry as his sister’s tiny feet kick through his mother’s dress, and he understands. He dries his tears with the back of his hands and answers I know, and Hazelle hears the underlying I promise laid there like a gift at her feet.

The fire in the mines might’ve taken his father, but it started a bulging star on the son’s throat.

III.

feast

noun /ˈfist/  
Any rich or abundant meal

It was my trap.

No, it wasn’t.

It was. You always place yours closer to the cypress trees, so I started putting mine here near the lake. I’m willing to share, but you have to admit it was my trap.
He raises his eyes from skinning the rabbit just a little, and gray eyes fall on gray. He’s been hunting with her for about 10 months now, and he’s still not quite used to looking at her and finding his own eyes staring back; the tragedy in them, the same restlessness, the same challenge in the act of breathing air outside the perimeter of Twelve. He’s not used to having someone younger not doing what he says, and daring his actions, or asking for further reasoning to do something other than “Your brother says...”. But here she is, this tiny force of nature who doesn’t share much, or laughs much, but who has helped him so much even if he doesn’t say it, and even if she becomes insufferable when she thinks one of his traps is hers.

*Catnip, I've been doing this far longer than you have. It wasn't your trap.*

You see, he’s been teaching her how to make snares for a while; where the knots go, the best places where game comes about, the right times of the day to place them, and how to know when to wait, but one of the downsides to it is that her snares end up looking a little like his, and to be fair, he absolutely does not know if the snare that caught this rabbit was hers or his. To be fair he was planning on sharing it with her, but her insistence on the fact that it is hers ignites some instinct on him, a territoriality in her tone that he recognizes because he uses it all the time as well, and the similarity between them sometimes is so much he suddenly feels he has to test it.

And anyway, he found the rabbit first, he’s hungry and *oh so very bored*, and he likes to hear her speak.

*Stop calling me Catnip. I can recognize my own snares. That rabbit is mine.* He raises his eyes again towards her, and he sees the resolve there. He sees that this is one of those battles that he’s going to have to address and that just won’t slide, and for some reason he feels fond of that. It’s comforting to know when things aren’t okay to be swept under the rug, when things are direct and honest, and demand to be dealt with in order to move on.

He sighs, cocks his head to the side and, in front of him, Katniss folds her arms across her chest with a grimace that would look more menacing on a taller girl, but he treats her disdain with the respect it deserves and answers: *How about this? How about... I race you swimming to the other side of the lake for the rabbit. Whoever wins the race, gets the rabbit.*

*That’s not fair. It was my snare.* She answers with a stern voice, but there’s a comfortable spark at the corner of her eyes while she eyes the rabbit and considers the proposal. She is hungry, and proud, but he knows she also likes to swim, and he loves the way her eyes turn playful at the possibility.

But he’s also very hungry, and he knows a thing or two about pride as well. Neither of them are willing to back down on this.

*That’s as close to fair as it will get.* He says and busies himself again with the skin of the rabbit, and he hears her sigh in mock disdain. Sometimes it surprises him how much he picks up of her mood from her mannerisms, and how he can tell that she's both annoyed and excited at the thought of touching the cool water just from hearing air coming out of her body. He swears he knows her enough by now to say with certainty that she just rolled her eyes at him, that she will throw her arms out in feigned defeat, but that she will agree to the swim.

They're both so stubborn and proud, and challenging, made of the same thing.

*Fine. But when I win, just remember that I said we could share, and you didn't want to.* She releases her arms from the knot in her chest, and without any further exchange, she's laughing and throwing herself into the lake, clothes and all, and when he finally catches up to what is happening, she’s at least two arm strokes ahead of him.
She’s fast and an excellent swimmer, but he’s taller and knows how to hold more air than her. He plays on these advantages and instead of stroking his arms, he dives underneath and moves his extremities in tandem to propel him forward. In moments like this, it’s easy to forget this is illegal, it’s easy to remember his age and hers. It’s easy to forget this is not a hobby; that they’re not just fighting for a rabbit and going for a leisurely swim, that this is what they need to do to stay alive, but Gale thinks that the true beauty of it is that even though it’s easy, neither of them ever forgets this last thing. They always know the stakes, they always know what they can lose every moment, especially when out in the woods.

He swims with everything he has and exploits all his advantages in this comfortable play with her, and sure enough, when he reaches the other shore and smiles in victory, he’s not surprised to find her ten seconds later crawling at his ankle to pull herself out, defeated but with a smile stretching out her cheeks.

You’re an idiot. I will go check on my other snares.

I might be an idiot but I have a rabbit.

Yeah, yeah. Whatever. I let you win. He beams, and she’s wet but she starts walking a fair distance away from him, fiddling with some berries and roots she has on her satchel, and he knows she will honor the deal they made. He truly is hungry, and it's nice to have something he can say he won and is his.

He makes the fire and places the rabbit on a stick, and lays on the ground for a while; closes his eyes after staring at the foliage of the trees above, the warmth of the sun on his skin. He never would have imagined that the world could be like this. Katniss had her father that taught her about herbs and the woods, and the lake, but Gale’s father never ventured outside the fence; Gale did the discovering of this much green out of necessity and with no guide or idea as to what to expect. But Katniss knows a lot of things he didn't understand before, and even though it's still new, and he sometimes thinks he still needs to test their silent agreement, he knows she's helped him not just with hunting, and feeding his family, but she's also helped some vital part of him he can only find out here, with no curfews and the birds singing freely and the sounds of a stream whispering about calm and peace.

You see, after Katniss, how could he imagine a world that doesn't have peace?

There was so much possibility in the green of the leaves on top of his head, so much promise on the blue sky that left orange tints in the inside of his eyelids. So much solace in a girl who knew his pain and understood the language of survival, and the language of his thoughts.

He realizes he has dozed off too late, and what startles him awake is the sizzling of a fire being put to rest, and sprinkles of water jumping all over his pants. His body is turned upright in alarm to find an unsmiling Katniss that is ever so amused, looking down on him with a small vase empty of water in her hands, mocking the burned meal on his left.

How long was I out? He demands in anguish, part of him thinking of what could have happened if the fire had caught green leaves and smoke would have started going upwards, signaling life outside the known world.

Long enough to spoil a whole meal for nothing, actually. She sits beside him as the embers still sing from the water that was poured on top of them, and she’s not smiling, but he can tell this is her version of gloating. The rabbit was probably hers anyway, and he's managed to spoil a whole
meal for two unnecessarily. He feels a little like he deserves her gloating, like he deserves her silent reproach. It feels like someone was bound to put him in his place somehow to remind him that he’s not infallible, or that he can’t be, not when he has four other mouths to feed.

He opens his mouth to say sorry, and rolls his tongue inside his mouth to shape the word to convey that he was an idiot after all, that the fact that she didn’t leave him to burn, or that she hasn’t reprimanded him yet proves that she’s trustworthy, that there’s a bond here, but what can he tell Katniss that Katniss doesn’t already know, or that she doesn’t already feel, and when she says: From now on, we just share the snares, okay?, and as she gives him a handful of strawberries, he no longer feels like has to be cocky, or proud, at least not around her, but he does wonder if this is what grown-ups mean when they talk about companionship and soulmates in the world.

IV.

quintessence

Noun /kwɪntəsˈɛns/  
The most perfect embodiment of something.

Gale can pinpoint the exact moment he lost her.

It was not on the reaping of the 74th Annual Hunger Games, when all odds betrayed them in front of the whole country and he bore scratches and bite marks as her sister screamed out No.

It was not when, a thousand miles away, he saw kisses shared for the cameras with another boy he actually came to respect. He didn’t lose her on train cars or nightmares he knows could only find solace in the boy who had physically lived through the same hell with her.

It was not on the reaping of Panem’s third Quarter Quell, when the simple sight of her on that podium made his blood curdle in every single one of his veins, or when the words should have and run found their way out of his lips when weeks before he’d said I’m staying here. He didn’t lose her when she was taken from him with no rights to goodbyes and he was left thinking that no rebellions or armies made sense if she ended up dead.

And it was certainly not after the war ended, and he said Shoot straight staring at the lifeless eyes of someone who had lost everything she had held dear, even the will to blame it out on him.

He loses her before that; in the second Capitol parade, when he’s looking at her burning on a screen on a Sunday at home. He loses her the same Sundays that he used to set aside for her.

And it’s not that she’s holding someone else’s hand, or that she might not come back this time around what makes him realize she’s gone; it’s actually the way her eyes look when her coal black dress ignites and when the camera makes a close-up to her face. Her eyes are piercing and accusing and make no attempt to disguise the utter hatred in them as she stares right at the President that has tainted everything and anything that has ever been good. She isn’t smiling, she doesn’t look like she’s breathing either and for once she’s not pretending to be anything she’s not. The Capitol attire that engulfs her in flames has inadvertently provided her with an opportunity to showcase her real thoughts and feelings for the whole nation to see, and it’s so rebellious, and so
much like the Katniss he knows, that he feels his throat closing up and water gathering in his eyes. She finally understands it. She has always understood it, and he knows that it’s because she’s given up on having him that she thinks she can get away with giving this rebellion the best she’s got.

He hears the neighbors sing those four notes she sang with Rue in the first games as the parade goes on and on, and, the fake flames keep licking every part of her skin with the same fire that consumes his soul. He loves her so much in that moment that even though the hurt feels like a raw living thing, he’s happy to be the scapegoat. Gale has only ever had practice letting things go and letting them burn perhaps to prepare himself to sacrifice her, so that the rest of the world can have hope.

Even if she does come back by some miracle, or fate, things will never be the same. The world will always need her to have faith.

Gale can pinpoint the exact moment he lost her, and the exact moment Panem found her, and the rest of the story has already been told.

V.

hearthstone

noun /ˈhɑrθstoʊn/

Home

When the Capitol burns the only place he has ever known like the palm of his hand and forces him, and nearly a thousand others to watch countless of people die, the candle that was slowly heating up his core finds fuel and turns to an inferno.

You see, one thing he’s learned working at the mines is that if you expose metal to enough pressure and fire, the resulting alloys bring about the strongest steel, and that is what they’re making of him. With every single life lost, and with every single building that is now unmade, the Capitol has forged the armor that he’ll use when he meets his demons face to face.

People call him hero later for the lives he managed to keep safe, and others call him monster for the decisions he was willing to make, but when you survive the decimation of your home, the stealing of your best friend, the marking of your skin with whips and chains just because you had the nerve to live, when you survive any and all those things, they grant you permission for whatever hell you manage to unleash.

They forced him to watch his home burn, he will force them to watch what they’ve made of him.

(epilogue)

(the one thing that wouldn’t burn)
The truth is that leaving for District 2 is not as hard as one would think. Up until then, Gale’s never been in a position where he can hoard possessions, so the packing and the preparing of his cargo is easy: favorite boots, pair of socks, duffle bag, board a train, ready to go.

He realizes early in the trip that the attempt to not think of who he is leaving behind in a dreadful state of mourning he can’t soothe, is completely futile, so he focuses his eyes on the horizon of every District on the route, looking for pastures, valleys, trees and forests. For every hint of woods found in the landscape, or for every smiling innocent child that he knows won’t be subjected to another set of Games, he lets his mind drown in one memory shared with Katniss, or in conversations shared with Prim.

As he replays them, he categorizes his memories of Katniss into beginnings, middles, and ends, and it doesn’t matter where he puts her smiles, her tears, or her lips, every memory reignites a fire beast in his lower abdomen that logic tells him he should tame. But the thing is the chemistry in Gale’s heart has involved blazes for so long that he doesn’t know how to quench them or put the fire to rest, not when it has been the only thing keeping him alive or making him brave to face every decision he’s ever made.

Will he miss her? Of course he will. For years he will look at himself in the mirror and see it so evidently on his forehead that he will understand why no one ever asks him questions about her even though everyone knows they were connected. For years, Gale will think about that word — connected — full of too much past tense and too many things unsaid, and the yearning in his stomach will become corporeal, the emptiness of his hands will become a living thing. But he will also bear the weight of why he left the remnants of District 12 gladly on his shoulders, and when faced with the question Would you leave her again? the answer will always be Of course I would.

And it is in this state and with this certainty that he goes back to rebuild the District where he caused more damage, it is with this knowledge that he joins the regiment positioned exactly where the Nut burned. And when he’s out there, unpacking his duffel bag, on a standard issue army bed, longing for things he can fix, his fingers close around a round cold metal with uneven edges and a sharp point, and even before he draws his hand out, and looks at what has accidentally traveled with him from so far away, he knows he will always keep Katniss’ mockingjay pin as his treasure because, like him, it survived a war and so much fire just so it can always remind him how much freedom cost.

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