

School #46, Student Matthew S., Aged 17

Tu pater et mater lacrimis retinete dolorem, nam fato raptam non potes eripere.

You, father, and mother, hold back your sorrow with tears, for you're not able to take back what fate has snatched away.

The withered old man held the punt steady against the shore as the young boy clambered aboard. The boy was only nine or ten at most, short, with brown hair, and obviously not a slave. Slaves usually didn't make it onto this ferry.

The man in the boat held out a pallid hand and croaked, "Fare." His voice sounded older than time itself.

Nodding distractedly, the boy spat out a slightly damp coin into the outstretched palm and resumed looking about. Out past the battered bulwark, the river flowed by darkly, coming from out of the gray mist and heading right back into it. On the shore he'd just left, an occasional solitary soul drifted past, staring longingly at the old craft.

The old ferryman was pushing off now, so the boy sat down. He'd only ever been on a boat once before and he didn't yet trust himself to remain standing. He watched the old man as he pushed the craft slowly along with his long pole, wondering how someone so thin and withered could keep the boat steady with just a stick.

"Does your job ever get boring?" asked the boy curiously.

The ferryman turned and stared at him blankly, punting still, even though he was no longer facing the direction they were going. The boy didn't question it; the man looked like he'd been at this for quite the long time.

"My name's Lucius," he continued, whispering the rest of his name as the man continued to stare. "Lucius Silvanus..." The ferryman clearly wasn't much of a conversationalist, the boy decided. He kept on talking, because the boat made him feel lonely.

"I saw Caesar once! Before I came here, I mean. I saw him when he came back from that place... uh... Gaul. He was bald." The boy giggled conspiratorially, "He looked kind of funny. I didn't say that, though. There were soldiers staying near us. He went and talked to them, then his soldiers fought their soldiers. I couldn't tell them apart, really. Caesar's were dirtier. I went to watch, even though I wasn't supposed to."

The ferryman continued to punt and stare, though his gaze may or may not have been softer. Lucius was on a roll, though so he kept going.

"Before that, I always wanted to be in the army, but when I saw all the men fighting, I changed my mind. I saw one guy get hurt; he screamed real loud..." Lucius drifted off into silence.

The ferryman knew of whom the boy was talking about. Many people had come through recently, most of them with money to pay the fare, and many of whom had mentioned people screaming. It was like an exodus from the boy's hometown. None of the man's features betrayed this, of course; he just kept pushing the boat along. He wasn't a very interesting person.

They were about halfway across when the boy spoke up again. "I got hit with an arrow at the battle, in my shoulder. I didn't cry though," he added toughly. "Someone from where I live found me and took me home. I couldn't walk to well, and I was bleeding a lot. I think my mother and father were angry with me, though, for going and watching; I wasn't supposed to. They were crying"

Lucius was starting to run out of things he wanted to talk about, and they were only two thirds of the way across the dark river, so he took a little break to save what he was going to say. In the mean time, he watched over the side of the craft for any fish in the water. He saw some things that might've been fish, but he wasn't sure. It was awfully murky.

"Before I came here, you know, they said the arrow was Pompey's. I don't know who he is," the boy said retrospectively. "But I really think I like Caesar better. He didn't shoot me."

Lucius looked up from the flowing water to the poling man. He had the same blank expression on his face. The boy wondered whether it was really as shallow as it made the man seem, or if he could just say the word 'fare'.

He tried a question, "Do you know Caesar?"

This didn't get a direct response, but the man did start poling faster. Lucius didn't know if it was because of the question, or just because they were starting to near the other shore. He kept on talking, he had a few more things to say before he left.

"I told my parents it's okay to cry. I always feel better when I cry. I maybe cried a little bit when I was in bed and they were taking the arrow out. I was dizzy then, so I don't remember a whole lot." Lucius looked down at his hands, "That was the last I saw them, though."

After a few moments of silence, the battered boat slid smoothly up onto the shore, where the ferryman held it with his punting pole, gesturing for the boy to get off. After scrambling onto the shore, Lucius turned back to face the ferryboat, whispering, "Thank you."

The man nodded – the first reaction he'd seen from him – and pushed back off the shore to pick up the next paying soul. As the boy turned and headed further into the underworld, Charon smiled – barely – to himself and pushed his way across the Styx. People rarely talked to him, but he always enjoyed it when they did. Especially those who were still innocent. All too many either tired with life or kicked out for good reason came through and tarnished his lovely boat, and the little boy, Lucius, was almost a breath of fresh air. He'd put in good word for him.