

**PHOTO OF THE
ORIGINAL POEM
'THE LAKES STILL
BREATHE'**

The Lakes Still Breathe

A Tale of Elmwood's Forbidden Forest

I. The Discovery

The DelaRosa children were not supposed to be there.

Their mother's warnings had been clear: Never step past the stone fence. Never go where the mist gathers thickest. And never—under any circumstance—wander into the Forbidden Forest. But children are drawn to the forbidden as moths to flame.

It was late autumn when Liliana DelaRosa, all of twelve years old, dared her younger brother Mateo to follow her into the trees. The day was gray, the air metallic with the smell of rain. They climbed the moss-slick fence when no one was watching, landing in a carpet of dead leaves that muffled their footfalls. The forest swallowed them almost immediately. Sound dulled. The air thickened. Even the birds dared not sing. Mateo clutched his sister's sleeve, whispering, "It feels like the trees are listening."

They walked deeper, guided not by courage but by the thrill of trespass, until they reached a clearing where something strange stood nailed to an old elm.

A scroll, browned and brittle with age, was staked to the bark with two rusty nails. A fishhook gleamed where it bit through the parchment, as though someone had pinned it not to display but to trap it there—like a specimen. The edges of the parchment were burned, curling like skin held too close to a flame.

Liliana tugged Mateo closer. "It's writing," she whispered. She traced the black ink, faded but legible, the letters slanting like a hand that trembled as it wrote. Together, they read:

The lakes are still breathing—I heard them in the fog,
not the wind, not the trees, but the hush between my footsteps
when I tried to leave...

The poem unspooled like a confession. It spoke of watchers beneath the water, of a bell tolling without a ringer, of bodies that floated skin-first, empty as discarded coats.

Mateo's voice quivered. "Who would leave this here?"

But Liliana, bolder, pulled the parchment free. The nails screamed against the wood, the fishhook clattered to the ground. She rolled the scroll carefully and slipped it into her coat. "Whoever it was, they wanted it hidden. Which means it's ours now."

II. The Blythe Shadow

The children didn't know it then, but the parchment was tied to an older story—older even than Elmwood's fence and the whispers of their parents.

Long ago, on the edge of the forest, stood the stone houses of the Blythes. They were one of the original Pillar families, their lives steeped in strange devotion. They built their homes close to the caves and underground springs, claiming the water beneath the forest was sacred. For decades they held plays and rituals in the caverns, where echoes of their voices mingled with the drip of unseen waters.

No one spoke of what those rites contained. Some claimed the Blythes sought to “keep the lakes asleep,” while others believed they were coaxing something to wake.

In 1949, the entire family vanished. The stone houses still stand, windows hollow as skulls, their doors sealed by vines and silence. Some say the Blythes went underground permanently, joining their gods in the flooded chambers. Others whisper they were taken back by the lakes they worshipped.

The poem on the elm bore their mark. Its cadence echoed the fragmentary chants once overheard in the Blythes' rituals, the ones neighbors recalled with a shudder but could never repeat. And now, inexplicably, it had found its way into the DelaRosa children's hands.

III. The Watchers

That night, Liliana unrolled the scroll by candlelight. The ink shimmered strangely, as if wet. Mateo sat on her bed, knees drawn to his chest.

“It's just a poem,” Liliana said, though her voice lacked conviction.

“Poems don't get nailed to trees with hooks,” Mateo shot back. She read aloud: Only watchers that glint like wet teeth just beneath the ripple...

The candle flickered violently. The flame stretched tall, then guttered. From outside the window came the faint toll of a bell. Slow, deliberate, and distant—as though struck from beneath water.

Both children froze. The nearest church was miles away.

“Liliana,” Mateo whispered, pale as milk. “It's them.”

“Who?”

“The watchers.”

When she dared look at the scroll again, the letters had shifted. New lines bled into the parchment like fresh ink, words not present in the clearing:

Those who read will see the lakes.

Those who see will hear their names.

Those who hear will never leave.

The scroll pulsed faintly, like skin stretched over something breathing.

IV. The Forest Remembers

The children tried to tell their parents, but words failed. How do you describe breathing lakes to those who laugh at the dark? So they kept the scroll hidden.

But the Forbidden Forest did not forget. For nights afterward, Liliana dreamed of fog rolling across still water. In her dream, a man in river-stained boots stood on the shore, whispering her name. When she tried to look at his face, it dissolved into ripples. Mateo grew quiet, pale beneath his eyes, as though something were feeding on his sleep. He swore he heard footsteps trailing him, even when no one was there.

On the fourth night, they returned to the clearing. The elm tree stood bare, but the bark still bore the scars of the nails. Beneath it lay the fishhook, rusted, but wet.

“Liliana,” Mateo whispered, “what if we weren’t supposed to take it?”

She knelt, touching the hook. A drop of water clung to the metal. But when she pressed her finger to it, the droplet tasted of salt—like a tear, or like the sea. There were no seas near Elmwood. No lakes, either. Only rumors of pits, sinkholes, and springs that tunneled far below the earth—into the same caverns where the Blythes once performed their plays.

Yet that night, as they left the forest, the children heard it: the hush between footsteps, the syllables no mouth could form. The sound of water, breathing.

V. The Bell Beneath the Water

Archivists in later years would confirm the scroll’s authenticity. It

was old, older than Elmwood itself, its fibers traced to parchment used in the 1800s. The fishhook was barbed in a style no longer forged. The nails were hand-wrought, streaked with an iron content unique to the veins beneath Elmwood's soil.

But the children knew these things long before the archivists. They had lived them. The poem was no mere writing. It was a warning. Or perhaps an invitation. The last lines, scrawled faintly at the bottom of the scroll, said:

We say they are lakes. Still. Cold. Pretty.

But they are only still when they're sleeping.

And lately...they haven't slept at all. The Lakes Still Breathe.

When Liliana read it aloud in full, she heard the bell again. This time, Mateo heard it too. A long, tolling note that made the glass in their window shiver.

And in that moment, they understood: The lakes were not outside Elmwood. The lakes were beneath it. Sleeping things, restless now. Breathing. Waiting. Just as the Blythes had warned—or perhaps hoped.

VI. The Vanishing

The poem spread quietly among scholars, occultists, and thrill-seekers. They came to Elmwood, searching for the so-called breathing lakes. Some swore they saw ripples where no water stood, or teeth glinting in the soil. Others vanished outright. Of the DelaRosa children, records fracture. Some say they disappeared together, hand in hand, lured by the toll of that hidden bell. Others claim they grew up, scared but silent, and passed down their story only in whispers.

Yet the scroll remains—rusted nails, fishhook, and all—preserved in the archives. And when archivists handle it too long, they say the parchment warms, and a hush fills the air, like footsteps muffled by fog.

VII. The Legacy

To this day, those who read the poem aloud claim to hear something breathing just beyond the edge of hearing. Some dismiss it as imagination. Others swear it is the watchers—patient, glinting, hungry.

The Forbidden Forest pretends to be closed, as it is ringed by fences that never seem to hold. Children still dare each other to climb over, and sometimes they return with wild eyes and damp boots. Sometimes they do not return at all. And the poem? It is recited still, its words etched into Elmwood's history like scars in bark.

The lakes are still breathing.

And lately...they haven't slept at all.

The Lakes Are Still Breathing

Author unknown. Recovered from a damp page
pinned
to a tree with a fishhook. No lake nearby.

The lakes are still breathing—I heard them in the fog,
not the wind, not the trees,
but the hush between my footsteps when I tried to
leave.

They breathe in syllables no mouth could make,
soft as rot, sharp as bone,
and deeper than the map will show.
There are no fish. There never were.
Only watchers that glint like wet teeth
just beneath the ripple.

I saw a man with river-stained boots say a name
and vanish.

The water didn't take him.

The water welcomed him back.

No one remembers who dug them.

But there are stories—of a family that never
drowned,

of a bell that tolls beneath the surface,
of skin that floats without a body.

We say they are lakes. Still. Cold. Pretty.

But they are only still when they're sleeping.

And lately...they haven't slept at all.

*The original poem was written on a scroll that was
found hidden away, then later located
by archivists. Fishhook and
nails still attached.*