

THE CICADA CRIES AND SO DO I

SAMUEL KNEPPRATH



PROSE CONTEST FINALIST

From the incessant buzzing outside my window that morning, I knew it was May. Usually awoken by the thunderous sounds of my Action Man alarm clock singing its heroic and titular theme, not even my favorite Saturday morning superhero could escape the devilish chirps of the Antichrist's own creation. Having had Mr. Johnson's biology class last year, I knew that this buggo Beelzebub held some value to something in this world *which is all fine and dandy* but that doesn't mean looking at their ugly mugs day-in and day-out for a whole two months was anything but easy. Ever since I was little and first laid eyes on a cicada, I nearly shat my pampers—seeing a fly the size of a half-eaten Twinkie just confirmed life was going to be anything but a smooth ride. As you grew, your fears grew too—from spiders and bears to dentists and clowns, and then it's just women and death until you face either one and made amends one way or another. But no matter what, even if you traveled to the deepest darkest parts of the city—the parts even Action Man would piss himself over—this fruit fly on steroids still would cause a cold sweat on the back of your neck like bringing home a report card of straight Fs right after Pops came back from the belt sale down at Sears.

Sure, I probably would've deserved it in that case, but either way,

you'd need a dad to actually be there to get angry and whip your ass to begin with. The condition of my ass aside, I knew I had to drag it in all its soft, lash-free glory out of my bed in order to get ready. The silver lining to these little shit cicadas was that their droning whirlwind acted as much an omnipresent death chant as it did a celebratory trumpet in honor of my last week as a freshman at Myron High. Nobody really knew the origins of the school's name until senior year, during which you had to take Mr. O'Reilly's class on the town's history, but at that point the seniors were too busy passing flasks and greasing up their hot rods to give a damn. Who could blame them? They were blowing this dirt heap in the direction of the nearest university football team that could schmooze and sign them the quickest. What do a few dusty pioneers have to do with a wet shirt contest and a keg stand?

While I knew one day I'd have the booze and the babes, right now I was content with my Raisin Bran and milk. Once I'd finished middle school, my mother said I was too old for the *highfalutin* neon-colored cereals with their snaked-tongued mascots and moved me up to grown-up cereal, the kind that served a purpose beyond frilly box tops and cheap Chinese knickknacks. This cereal put hair on your chest and worked on your colon like Muhammad Ali. I would've actually believed her too, if I didn't see just how cheap they were peddling this cardboard for down at the corner shop.

I ate my smattering of brown bits and dusty raisins as George sat at the head of the table in his standard morning attire of a wife beater and matching Budweiser. Mother usually only kept guests on the weekends, but somehow this guy had made the cut to stick around and see the potentially fulltime gig he could be walking into.

"How's it goin', Sport?" George asked.

I was surprised he even acknowledged me, let alone let out anything besides a grunt or belch.

"Oh, you know, the ol' *Monday grind*." I said, keeping a close eye on the bran to make sure I wasn't going to be left with a bowl of damp sawdust.

"You don't say. I'd take the "grind" of schoolboy over the shit down at the mill any day. What year are you anyway? Deborah says it's a mood killer talkin' about ya."

"And *God knows* you wouldn't want to mess with that, right? I'm

a freshman, sophomore in a couple weeks.”

“Sheesh kid, now see why your mom would do anything to keep from bringing up a brat with such a mouth. Just forget I asked about it and keep eating your Captain Whatever-the-fuck.”

With the number of things I could’ve responded with in that moment, I saw the threat of a black eye or a red ass to be ever more real when there’s an actual adult around rather than just rehearsing the lines in front of the full body mirror adorned with clippings secretly snipped from the lingerie section of the Sears catalogue. I scarfed the slop down—now with the added sour taste of this sweaty schmuck lingering in the air—but, hey, if I get my membership to the Clean Plate Club revoked then Mother would finally have an excuse to feed me less than she actually does.

I bagged my books, brushed my teeth, ruffled my hair, all punctuated with the traditional slamming of the front door being the ever-loving “goodbye” to Mother. I stood kicking dust next to my house’s streetlamp waiting for the others. Jerry Rosenberg was the first to arrive, as usual. Cursed with the need to be punctual set upon by his folks, you could always count on Jerry to be there on the dot come rain, shine, hurricane, nuclear holocaust—really whatever God decided to throw our way. Amidst the standard morning grumbles we waited for our third in this triad of a friendship, but of course Bo was keeping up with the nickname of “No-Show Bo.” I couldn’t blame the guy though, being a farmer’s boy meant the work didn’t stop for the school bell, it just kept coming like a deep wound that would never stop bleeding. That being said, with all the fields he had to plow and all the shit he had to shovel, he was one built sixteen-year-old. Not even the football players had the cojones to stack up to Bo, so they just left us alone by association.

“It’s about time you prick! We’re gonna be late now thanks to you and whatever horse you had to fuck.”

“Look, I told you we had to inseminate a mare once! Once! Just drop it before someone thinks you’re being serious and I get thrown in a looney bin. We walking or we talking?” Bo stood, chest puffed beneath a pair of muddied overalls. He knew he was my golden ticket to avoiding the onslaught of swirlies and general shit-pushing at school. That paired with the fact that I was closer to Jerry’s noodled physique meant whatever creek Bo steered us in, I was up it without a paddle.

“Whatever man, I’m walking.” I said, finding a decently sized stone and kicking it towards our path.

The three of us always had a story to tell and a thing to kick—it was a rusty beer in the summer, a chunk of ice in the winter and those walnuts with the spongy green flesh coating in the fall. Those were our favorite since if you kicked them hard enough chunks of the skin flew out everywhere, and the blackened innards left streaks on the pavement. But, like many of our fun and games of the past, they were ruined because Mrs. Rosenberg found a pair of Jerry’s pants freckled with the inky nut juice from one of our more violent walks back from school.

“You hear about the girl that shoved rancid meat in her pussy?” Bo said as the rock skidded in front of me.

“Get out of town, Bo. That’s just some urban legend.”

“I’m being serious—Kevin Sanders told me his brother graduated with her.”

“Why on Earth would you believe Kevin Sanders? The dude has more bullshit coming out of his mouth than you shovel in a week. Last week he said he pinned Ashley Roberts behind the football bleachers during the last game.”

“Just let him tell the story, Hank.” Jerry chimed in, out of character for his usual doormat of a presence.

“Atta boy Jerry! You still got some hope left in you. So, like I was saying, Kevin told me there was this chick that got off being as filthy as possible. One day, she went over to Joe’s Deli and paid the guy off to let her go through their dumpster. Joe, not knowing how freaky this girl was, just saw the free cash on the table and let her at it. A few minutes later, Joe walked in on this girl rubbing last week’s corned beef against her crotch with one hand and holding up a mound of maggots in the other.”

“Jesus Christ, Bo, you’re gonna make me spew.” I remarked, queasy at the memory of the milky collection of beige and violet clumps I ate only minutes prior. Jerry seemed to be taking this horror show rather well for a guy who could barely handle the kiddie rides at the county fair.

When the communally kicked rock hit the chain-link parameter of Myron, we let out a collective sigh and pushed forth, knowing that nine or so years of the same routine didn’t make the eight hours locked in this place any easier. With nods of “see you on the other side” both

given and received, we each went to homeroom and let the collective lonesomeness of high school take its course.

Classes were had, lectures were ignored, another meal went down the hatch, and then I got sweaty on the track while Coach Franklin went on his smoke break. The bell rang, but instead of signifying the end to another day of suburban suffering here, it was ringing as a means to beckon Jerry, Bo, and I to find the quickest way to the parking lot. It wasn't like we had a car or someone with a car to meet up with, it just looked a hell of a lot cooler than immediately walking home with all the squares, and you had a chance of bumming a smoke from someone with an expired pack or just a charitable hand.

Shutting my locker, I looked out on the sea of begrudging faces hoping to find the ones worn by my partners in crime. Between the panicked freshmen running towards whatever lost or forgotten book or assignment in the hopes of finding it before the buses left and the slowly forming cliques of extracurricular kids, trying to find the guys was like Jerry trying to find a date to prom—tiresome and unrewarding. During the scan however, I locked eyes with Ms. Haverstein and her slowly emptying classroom. She'd made the transition from junior high easier, earning her place high above the rest of dead-eyed and dusty faculty in this joint. Sure, it was Algebra, and sure, I was barely passing, but something about the bun she kept in with chopsticks and the fact she drew little smiley faces next to your test scores kept me going. While I may have actually gotten the scores required to receive those doodles only once or twice tops the entirety of the class, Ms. Haverstein seemed to like me enough to make a few exceptions here and there. If only Mother shared the same joyous smirk that test had when I came home with a D.

Maybe it's because the other guys joked and called her "Hefferstein" behind her back. Maybe it's because we've shared a couple conversations outside the realm of the Pythagorean Theorem and wherever the hell x is. Either way it seemed like we liked each other enough, and for that I was content. She was like a mom without all the chores, yelling, and knowledge of my living habits. To her I was just "Helpful Hank," a name received due to the couple times I stayed after to clean the chalkboards. To this day, I'll never be able to live down the shit I get from the guys, but it was one of the few nicknames I've had that was endearing.

We didn't find a smoke—even after begging Jack Thompson who kept trying to hide the fact that his old man gave him a carton for his

birthday—but we found something much, much worse. Wriggling ever so slightly in parking space 072 laid a used rubber swarming with ants. It must've sat there for a good couple hours at this point due to the latex' tired, wrinkled expression and the odor looming about as if we weren't at Myron but rather at a discount fish market somewhere off the east coast. Its lubed-up exterior was already soaked into the pavement, leaving a permanent shadow of the tantalizing actions that transpired however many class periods ago. Though everyone wanted to see what was happening, nobody wanted to get anywhere near the thing because each knew some wise guy would step forward and shove the poor bastard head first into the thing if they weren't careful.

“What do you think they're doing in there?” Jerry murmured in a state of disgusted nervousness over the tiny baggie of black and a yellowish white.

“Either they're eating or they're dying.” I replied.

“And I thought ants only ate humans when they were injected with some sort of radioactive chemical like in those science fiction serials they got playing down at the theater.” Bo said jokingly, trying not to let on how the uneasy the situation was making him.

We were curious who the owner and recipient of the rubber was, whether it was a jock and a cheerleader, a teacher and a student, or that one homeless guy who made passes at the freshman girls and one really unfortunate mutt. No matter how we sliced it, it was best just to let the ants squirm in their baby batter bliss and try our best just to forget about the whole debacle and walk home.

The hike back home wasn't as vocal as it was in the morning. Not a single mention of expired beef or genitalia to be heard which, while a pleasant change, made room for an awkward and viscous silence that was only to be interrupted by the pitter patter of the puck-shaped remainders of a Coors Yellow can. We each said our goodbyes; Jerry the first to go—not wanting his mom to worry about the potential escapades or horrors her precious baby could've gotten into during the mile walk to and from school, and then Bo—who had another mile and a half after we reached my streetlamp since his dad's farm needed to be just outside of the burbs to meet some city ordinance law that kept the working man away from the slightly less trashy working man.

The afterschool routine left much to be desired, but if it kept

Mother putting food on the table I was gonna do whatever it took—dumping out ashtrays, washing dishes, and taking out trash. It seemed like all standard kid affairs, though keeping your eyes out of the trash bags was a must that I learned many years ago. Just tie the knot and keep the jangling bag of squelching secrets at arm's length, and you'll be good to go. By the time, I had wiped the dinner table of whatever brownish residue it had gained from a day's worth of use, Mother had come back from whatever odd job she was able to muster that day. There were guests on occasion, sometimes for business and sometimes for pleasure, which usually meant at least a higher quality dinner than ground chuck with instant mash.

This time, it was that guy George again, now donning a quasi-tucked blue uniform, a pair of denim jeans and work boots—obviously just getting off shift at the nondescript mill mentioned before. Outside of his greasy mug, he was carrying a rotisserie chicken like it were a prized pigskin so I had solace in some decent grub. With the plates set and milk poured into glasses fogged over with a patina from the dollar store soap, we said our graces and chowed down. That's one thing I could always count on with my mother—no matter how dark, dingy, and vulgar her life got, she always answered to the Big Guy upstairs. Resting her chin on her praying hands, she looked up through crooked, false eyelashes at the crumbling ceiling and the never-ending skies like a child begging to their parents for a new toy or candy bar. I didn't know if I should take that as her being faithful or desperate, but either way, it was comforting.

Standard questions were asked—*school was fine, no I didn't learn anything new, I shaved a couple seconds off my mile time, I'll tell Jerry you said hi to Mrs. Rosenberg*, and then I was left to my own devices like a back-alley mutt who looked just cute enough to pry a few scraps from the guy closing up shop. Regardless of what I've said about George, he knew how to pick a chicken.

"This meal ain't half bad, George." I said. My mother was shocked I was speaking to her suitor of my own free will.

"Thanks, kid. I know a guy over by the mill who sells them for a buck and a quarter, knocks the socks off of whatever they're putting in the marts nowadays. With all them chemicals they're pumping into the birds, you might as well start sucking on an exhaust pipe I say."

I nodded though not knowing what chemicals they were

pumping into the birds, or even exactly how one would pump a bird full of anything at that point. Just one of those mysteries that best be left to the pumpers and the pumpees I guess.

The chicken slowly devolved into a savage pile of bones that reminded me of the one time we dissected an owl pellet in Mr. Johnson's class. Never really understood exactly why we did it, I don't think we were graded, but my hunch was to show that owls weren't ones to fuck with since anything that could swallow a whole rat meant business.

Another round of dishes before the nightly stack of assignments which went as smooth as any other night. How I've managed to retain enough to continue with this something passable despite goofing off in sixty-minute increments is beside me, but let's just say I've said a few more to the man in the clouds when overlooking my meals ever since it rose above a D. Whatever he saw must've been something really subtle, or he was just confusing me for another Hank altogether.

Though the chicken went down easy, it must've picked up some fighting spirit along the way because I awoke that night to a cold sweat that sent a quiver from one end to the other. It didn't help that the damn cicadas were back to their usual chirps that rattled in your skull like Mother Nature was taking a drill and holding down the trigger to the center of your forehead, but now on top of that every minute or so came the crackling of acorns slamming against my window.

Whether it was the orchestration that surrounded me or the simple fact of what hour it was in the morning, I stumbled around trying to find the can. I know I've been in this house for sixteen years, but I'm sure Einstein himself forgot where the shitter was from time to time. After a couple minutes of stumbling and my eyes finally adjusting I found the throne and did my business. That chicken came out swinging, but I just barely made it out on top: a few right hooks here and there acting as the real divide between walking away victorious. I decided against the championship belt, but reached for the bar of soap instead when the sound of a muffled cry rang out through the ever-creaking halls.

We'd been robbed before due to the fact that Mother kept the front door unlocked partially because she had some late night clientele, but more because replacing the key she lost the last time she got jumped was anything but cheap. Who would've guessed that some stamped piece of bronze could cost a day's pay? Though if that piece of bronze kept

some maniac with a knife or worse —then hell, where do I sign?

I went over to the kitchen counter where Mother kept the bat. Never making contact before, the bat still glistened like the day we bought it, but with the additional nail I'd hammered through the bulbous end like Bo said he'd seen in a mafia movie. The cries kept coming when I realized it came from Mother's room. Encroaching the door, it was apparent that whoever this perp was he must've been quite the monster. Every step seemed to be accompanied by a foundational quake with a force equal to that of the acorns currently bombarding the side of the house. I swung open the door, holding the bat in a stance I've only seen on a few Great Bambino card only to find that I wasn't looking a scene of a robbery, but rather of pornography.

The image burning into my corneas evoked a memory I tried my best to forget, perhaps as a means to shield my conscious mind from the fact that I was indeed watching George rail my mom.

It was the only time I had ever gone over to Bo's family farm. He said there was something interesting going on and that I should come and watch. I made my way over and found myself eye to eye with this little pink pig.

"Is there anything specific you call these guys, Bo?" I asked, bending down to pat its soft but slightly hairy head like a childhood pet I'd never have. The pig snorted with each pat and scratch.

"Well, for one, it's a girl, so we call them sows," Bo went on to explain, "We also don't typically name them just to keep from getting too attached to the thing."

"Why wouldn't ya want to get attached to her?"

"You try doing that with every animal that you have to buy, breed, and butcher, and well, see how long you last, city boy."

"Piss off man, just get on with whatever you wanted to show me so I don't have to stand around smelling manure all day."

"Suit yourself," Bo said, tapping the sow's behind with what looked to be a tiny rider's crop. It was surprising to see just how well trained the pig was to the butt taps, knowing exactly how fast and at what direction Bo wanted her to go. He led her to a tiny fenced-off area with a large doggy door near the rear. The rusty gate squeaked shut and Bo joined me on the dirt patch a couple yards away.

“Now what?”

“We wait for Big Boy.”

“Big Boy? I thought you said you didn’t name animals.”

“Big Boy is an exception, you’ll see what I mean.”

And just like that the biggest damn hog you could ever imagine pushed its way through the doggy door, causing a slight bend in the wood as it entered. As I was about to ask why the sow and Big Boy needed to share the pen, the fearful squeals of an ever-pacing pig mixed with what looked like the world’s largest and fleshiest corkscrew gave me all the answers I wanted and even the ones I didn’t. Then came the chasing, the mounting, the screams, and the final grunt of a supposed successful breeding. The sow timidly sat down and huffed every couple seconds, accented with a few full body twitches as Big Boy left just how he entered.

My face felt a wetness that stung when its trails mixed with the brisk morning farm air. I couldn’t tell if it was my mind reacting to the scene I had just witnessed or my body trying to compensate for my current inability to blink properly.

“Pretty wild stuff, right?” Bo stated as if he had just gotten off the rusted over tilt-a-whirl we rode each year at the county fair.

“Wild? *Wild?* Bo, you woke me up, dragged me out here, and showed me... whatever the fuck you wanna call that, and all you have to say is ‘pretty wild stuff!’”

“For Christ’s sake dude, stop acting like such a queer. Look, Scott Mitchell spilt the beans and told me you ain’t never seen a porno before, so I thought I’d do you one better and show you something a little more hands on.”

“Glad to know you hold a Playboy on the same level as pig cock. And you can tell Scott Mitchell that he better watch his fucking ass or else it’s gonna end up kicked.”

“Ah shove it! Look I was only trying to do you a favor, okay? How you ever going to swing with the big boys if you never been to a baseball game before?”

“If that’s what swinging looks like, I don’t wanna be up to bat anytime soon. Let’s just drop it, I’m going home.”

“Whatever man.”

I dropped the bat and slammed the door shut. I made my way back to my room hoping to God whatever I just saw was just part of some poultry-based fever dream, but the depth from which the pain radiated was uniquely physical. I covered my face in the thin mounds of cotton I called pillows and hoped the minor asphyxiation and wave of hissing cicadas would lull the squeals and whatever was left of my conscious body to the point of sleep. Who knows, maybe I could sleep forever.

The Action Man alarm went off as usual, though the theme song felt much more hollow, as if the hero the city needed may truly never answer the beacons of light that spelled out the letter A in the skies above. I went down for breakfast to an empty dining room table, though it didn't matter now that George had forever installed his presence in this household even if he should end up six feet under somewhere in Antarctica beneath a couple of penguins arguing over the last piece of fish. To say the bowl of bran tasted off was an understatement. Double checking the expiration of the milk which still had a good amount of days left, the acidic tang of spoiled milk kept flaring on my taste buds as if I was chugging the jug of white vinegar Mother kept in the cabinet under the sink for extreme cases of filth.

Books were again bagged, teeth were again brushed, hair was again ruffled. Standing at the streetlight however, I came across a cicada lying on its back. It must've fallen off a branch during the molting process because outside of the few sickly attempts of flipping over, its wings had been pretty mangled. So there it lay, waiting for whatever greater force to act upon it, whether it be an army of ants which preferred cicadas over semen, or a large bird not early enough to get the worm. I stared the little guy in the eye for a couple moments, letting the wind toss him around, almost landing him right side up but never quite. Even if he did land on his feet, then what? Would he find shelter with all the others who just barely survived? Would he walk the soil, cursing Mother Nature for letting the branch he was just so molting on to fall? Maybe he'd just find a deep enough puddle and just wait for the tiny bubbles to quit rising.

The exoskeleton cracked under the weight of my sneaker with an audible crunch and Jerry showed up right on time. If there was anything I could count on, it was him.