ON HARMONY, ON CONTAGION

JACOB LITTLE

My neck itches, so I scratch it. Now my right forearm. Now the back of my right hand. It's too dark to see if I'm missing some new rash, but I think the itching is due to a sudden paranoia about bugs landing on me. It's not a strong paranoia, but given where I am, I'm more aware of insects than usual. I'm sitting on a hillside in the forests of the Smoky Mountains with a bunch of strangers. We're here to watch fireflies.

I can see the outline of my fellow onlookers if I look for them. Or at least, I can see them when the fireflies are going. When they stop, we all sit encased in blackness for six full seconds. Then fireflies start blinking again. All the hills and trees light up across the sloping mountains. The lights are uncountable. They flash—in sync—for a minute at a time. Then they (we?) wait again.

I can't help but consider the electricity between them. The joint channel they tune into; the light, the feeling they bring inside their bellies; the way they see the night when they're together.

*

When I worked the night shift at Circle K right after undergrad, I had to drive thirty minutes to the darkened suburbs. Our yellow Shell sign was the only light for miles. Even the dogs were asleep to their barking.

The air was wet, hot as I swept and mopped alone, selling cigarillos to an occasional twenty-something, milk to desperately pale people. By 4 AM, I was done with my work and would sit by the drive-through window, staring through heavy condensation into the early St. Louis morning.

*

One day, when I was sixteen, I hid in my dark garage and sat in the back of our '98 Dodge Caravan. I let loose with ugly, wracking sobs—my snot ran thick. I still didn't understand what was happening to me, what depression would really be like; it was only a month or two after I had swallowed my parents' entire medicine cabinet with a lukewarm Caffeine-Free Diet Coke. My stay in psych ward had solved nothing.

After twenty minutes in the garage, my mom found me, opened the van's opposing back door, and sat in there with me. I kept crying. She didn't say a word. She just stared into the unfathomable distance of the passenger seat right in front of her.

Gradually tuning to her silence, I too grew still, laid my head back as the endorphins of relief and exhaustion pounded into me. After a while, I asked her *what's it like to have a crazy person for a son?* She didn't answer for a time, then said *I wouldn't know.*

*

A park ranger in the Smoky Mountains starts telling us about lightning bugs as we stand waiting for them to flash again. He says their glow is produced by a chemical called *luciferin* in their tails. It ignites at the touch of oxygen. I *hmm* at the Latin name's resemblance to the fallen angel. Apparently, almost 100 percent of the energy in the chemical reaction of *luciferin* is converted to light. This is impressive because, as the ranger tells us, "only 10 percent of an incandescent bulb's energy becomes light." The rest burns away, a dark heat.

I like being around people in the dark like this. It's easier to ignore the nuances, the differences. We all look strikingly similar in this light. I didn't expect that when I came out here. I came out here to be alone, to get away from a small town where I am always running into people I know. At the grocery store, at the laundromat, at the gas station. Out here, I'm anonymous. One of many. Part of a faceless collective.

The ranger tells us about other kinds of fireflies, like the female *Photuris,* a cannibalistic firefly species that he calls "femme fatales." They're drawn to the light of the synchronous males, hawking them out of the air to eat them, steal their nutrients. The ranger explains that, based on their species, fireflies can burn many colors: "some glow green, some yellow, some red, some orange." But the *Photuris* can mimic the colored light of different firefly species, beckoning them in, tempting them to their own death.

*

Late in my first year of public high school, after nearly ten years of the silence and separation of home-schooling, a boy in my geometry class talked to me about hockey. He was surprised to hear that I played—I was too weird to be a sports fan. And I wasn't friends with any of the other "hockey guys" in school. I didn't explain to him that I didn't have *any* friends, much less friends who liked the same things I did.

Two weeks after we first talked about hockey, I got a phone call from him on my family's house phone.

"We're getting a bunch of guys together to play hockey in the lot across the street from Southsun Apartments. You want in?"

When I hung up, I ran to my room to grab my hockey stick and rollerblades. I was crawling under my bed for my stick tape when I started crying. I don't really know why—maybe because it was dark down there and I had slowed down just long enough to realize I might finally have some friends.

So I took a minute or two to cry into the carpet down there before wiping my eyes, scooting out, and skating across the suburbs to join some friends in a game of pickup hockey.

*

When customers entered Circle K, I was hungry for their company, watched them. I wanted badly to talk to them. But so many stayed in

their cars, pulled into the drive-through, asking for a loaf of bread, a dozen Twinkies, a fountain soda (filled exactly half with ice, then three-quarters with Diet Coke, the last quarter with regular Coke).

One guy would appear out of the dark at least once a week, barefoot and bare-chested, walking a pit bull that panted and blinked away the flies. He would stand outside the drive-through window, buy a pack of Marlboro Reds, and smoke one on the spot. Once this rhythm was established, we never spoke.

*

A few months ago, when I first decided to go to the Smoky Mountains to see the fireflies, I started reading about synchrony, which is the tendency for things in close proximity to move, to light, to sound in unison. Like fireflies flashing together; or cicadas contracting and vibrating parts of their exoskeletons to produce a unified "chorus"; like schools of fish turning simultaneously; or like pendulum clocks swinging together—even the inanimate coordinate.

Proximity is essential. Birds in flight travel close together, in line, aware only of their nearest neighbor. The swinging clock needs the same sloping floor, its microscopic rocking, its soothing rhythm.

We even have a cluster of cells in our hearts called the sinoatrial node, which pulses electricity to the cells in the rest of the heart, causing them to sync, to gather the pattern that seems to pound in the air. We all keep time. We all bleed together.

Of course, another way of saying *everything is connected* is to say *everything is contagious.* Abuse and violence can spread through connected groups of people like a virus. Even depression can be considered contagious, can travel from person to person. It's spread by empathy, close up, through facial expressions, gestures, or conversation. It is spread through the copying of a particular kind of rumination.

I don't know where I "caught" my depression, but I know my sister had it, my father and mother had it. Many of my friends caught it over time. Shortly after my own failed suicide attempt in high school, my best friend found himself in the same psych ward I'd been in, on suicide watch for a week—no shoelaces, bedsheets, or shower curtains. Nothing we could hang ourselves with. A sickness I prayed I hadn't given him.

Because so much is communicable, I started to think of proximity as dangerous, for me and for others. That's why, five years after the

psych ward and six years after the pickup hockey game, I wiped down the pumps and emptied the garbage cans alone, in silence.

*

When I first started the night shift, the regular customers were upset. They missed the guy who had worked there before me, a notorious slacker who would sit behind the counter and play his guitar for them under the fluorescent lights. My boss would return in the morning to find the floor un-mopped, the cigarettes uncounted.

But habits require only time and repetition. And over time, the customers warmed up to me, collecting the routine of my presence to their chest until it was pulse.

Even at the time, I wondered if I was infecting them; if *my* aching need became *their* aching need. I wondered what my lonely tempo might do to them.

*

The night is getting darker in the Smoky Mountains. I can barely see the ranger's dim outline against the night sky. The fireflies flash around his silhouette in sparking lines. He looks like he's being struck by lightning.

I remember reading a story about a park ranger who got struck by lightning seven times. The first time his shoes had holes blown in them. Another time he was knocked unconscious in his truck. Even his eyebrows got burnt off.

He became a recluse. His friends avoided him—superstitious, afraid to get hit. After being struck *inside* his ranger station and having his hair catch fire, he started to carry bottles of water with him wherever he went. He started to believe storm clouds were chasing him.

But in the end, it wasn't the electricity that killed him. The park ranger died of a self-inflicted gunshot to the belly.

There are still nights that I would welcome such a gut-shot. Some nights where I swear I can hear the mosquitos whispering to me with their Miller Lite-breath about the amount of lightning a single body can hold.

*

In the psych ward, after my suicide attempt, there was a girl the rest of us called the Cat-Eater who was so thin we swore we could see through her skin to her organs, her bones. She had drunk bleach.

There was a girl we called the Chipmunk because of her tiny nose, freckles, and puffy cheeks. Her tinkly little voice barely rose above a whisper in group sessions when she told us about her father— how hard he hit her, the way he touched her.

Angela had hacked her wrists to a bloody mess, though she could still, somehow, play the piano with dexterity when they let us go to the rec room.

James was my roommate and never told any of us why he was there. He left before I did. No one took his bed.

And there was an older girl who, after hours of angry screaming, would laugh hysterically, point at everything, and say *you can put your weed in there.* One time she said *Sir Lickadickalot* and laughed two whole hours into lights-out.

*

When I was working at the Circle K, I didn't have proximity to my family or friends. They slept when I was up, awakened when I was exhausted. I had no one to tune into or sync with. No one I could monitor myself by or mimic the patterns of. But it wasn't just our schedules that caused the gulf between my family and me; we had long since stopped noticing when one of us was rocking, when someone had turned. The truth is, by then, it was easy to avoid connecting because there was already so little holding us together.

The truth is, out in that deepening dark, the phone call always went to voicemail. The aging grandmother played solitaire in her hospice bed, waiting for the chaplain to make his weekly visit.

The boy who always sat alone in the cafeteria didn't tell anyone—not even when they asked—about the time some kids at his new high school finally invited him to sit with them, only to laugh when he sat in the chair they'd covered in mustard. That boy might die an old man, or maybe much sooner, but he'll hold that story back for himself. Yet another small hurt for him to privately polish into tragedy.

*

When my father found my suicide note the morning a week before my sixteenth birthday, he ran to my body and shook me. He yelled my name, sat behind me and held me upright. He screamed for my mother, who called 911. I laid limp, unconscious. My sister cursed at me.

When help arrived, a large police woman ran up to my room, her hand reflexively resting on her holster. She shook me, asked what I had taken. When I didn't wake, she picked me up, threw me over her shoulder, and carried me to an idling ambulance, its doors open like a hungry mouth.

*

The bugs descended on the well-lit station whenever it got dark. They gathered together on the wet windows, on top of the gas pumps. There was a buzzing in the air. The June bugs thwapped against the doors and the flies plotted, rubbing their hands in the glow of $3.99 a gallon. Mosquitos tasted my sweet blood as I picked up empty Mountain Dew bottles, a single used condom.

By the time the sun rose, the bugs on the windows and doors had drowned in condensation. I distanced myself. I squeegeed their corpses off the glass.

*

As crazy as it might sound, getting hit by lightning seven times isn't all that many, not for a lifetime anyway. There's a lake in Venezuela where lightning strikes 1.2 million times per year. Many nights, it'll crash almost continuously, up to 280 times per hour. The lightning glows red, purple, orange, blue.

And even though no one knows for sure why it strikes so often, the local Yukpa and Barí tribes believe that the lightning is a celebration of fireflies paying tribute to their spiritual ancestors.

Maybe I should trust their proximity, their ability to tune in to their surroundings. But most nights I am skeptical about such optimism in the face of an electric, chaotic threat. When a room is loud or crowded, I get overwhelmed by the crashing, out-of-sync sounds of too many disparate desires, heartbreaks, furies, and fears—too many colors without names. Too many threats of emotional contagion.

But, other nights, when it gets quiet and most everyone is asleep, every person I see I understand. At least, that's what I tell myself.

Like on the nights when one woman—a regular, my mom's age—would enter the store, and I could feel our cells catch the same current. I could hear her thinning resolve like I was cupping a hand over my own ear.

Maybe I only felt her desperation because of our casually repeated vicinity. Or maybe I just felt her taking *my* palpable, throbbing depression to heart. I don't know.

Her company gave me no comfort. I gave her none, either. It wasn't that we didn't wish each other well: I tried to send something other than misery across the counter between us. I tried to make her laugh. I paid for her coffee when I could.

But mostly we just hummed together in silence. The crowning sun making us pulse in unison, in dread.

*

I don't know what I fear more: connection or separation. The contagious, glowing unity, or the dense, lonely dark.

I don't know how to chalk up the things others have suffered on my behalf as simply, "damage done." I don't know how to be with a person and not feel responsible for their gathering sickness. I don't know how to stop my illness spreading. Severing seems both the cause and the only cure.

*

My youth minister, Dave, came to visit me one day in the psych ward, and sat with me in my room. He started to pray for me out loud, his voice echoing in the buzzing, empty chamber. "Lord Jesus, be with us now. Be with Jake now. He's hurting, and he needs your presence. Lord, you've always been with him, always taken care of him. Help him to see that, Lord. Show him he's still here for a reason."

We were silent for a while. I didn't know what to say—I didn't feel any better.

Then I noticed Sylvester looking in at us from the hallway. Sylvester was a fifteen-year-old kid who wandered the ward like a scared child all throughout my week there. His hair was patchy, his eyes wide. His skinny, black arms protruded sharply from his baggy hospital gown. The nurses told us he had taken some bad ecstasy, would never recover.

In the doorway, he looked confused, curious. I greeted him gently. "Hey Sylvester."

Dave turned to face the door. He didn't know Sylvester, but could sense something was wrong with the terrified boy.

"Hey buddy, I'm Dave. Do you want to come in and pray with us?" Sylvester came in, cautious, and sat beside us on my bed. I don't remember anything Dave said after that. I'm sure he prayed some more, said something about the glory of God. None of the words he offered up had substance.

Instead, what I remember is what that room felt like with Sylvester in it. Like it was full, like it was alive and in pain. Like a current was running through my fingers, to my shoulders, to my nose and lips and forehead.

I looked up while Dave was praying. Sylvester was crying—so was I.

*

In the Smoky Mountains, the interest of my fellow visitors starts to wane after an hour. They grow restless. The small boys wriggle in their lawn chairs. The husbands crick their necks and shoulders and fingers. The park ranger runs out of factoids to share with us.

I can feel the disinterest spreading through the onlookers. By the second hour, most have disappeared to their tents or their cars. Those of us who are left feel like remnants. Like we're looking for something more out of this experience than just to watch some bugs flash.

I look at the man next to me, whose eyes are closed. I wonder what he's seeing.

I can't really make out the ranger's face, but I try to think of how it must feel to do this job night after night. I gather my resolve and decide to approach him.

"When does the flashing stop?" I ask.

He shrugs.

"Depends. We're reaching the end of the season, so things are pretty frenzied. But it often goes all night. Rain dampens the mood—or if it gets below fifty. Or if it's a full moon."

I nod, continue watching for a moment.

"What do you do when you're not up here with us tourists?" I ask him. "What's the best part of your job?"

I can feel more than see his surprise at my question. He answers slowly, then warms up. He tells me that he's a teacher, that he gets to talk to people about what he loves. That he gets to see them get infected with his excitement. He tells me that he prefers the one-on-one teaching moments more than the big group ones, "because then you can really make an impact." He talks for at least ten more minutes before slowing, then stopping.

I thank him and shake his hand. Tell him it was a pleasure to meet him and learn from him. I make eye contact—I want to make sure he sees me seeing him. Then I tell him to have a good night and start following the crowd making its collective way into sleep.