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The Year of Brood VIII

Jona L. Pederson

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FALL 2021 CHAPBOOK WINNER

FICTION

THE YEAR OF BROOD VIII



Jona L. Pedersen

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The Year of Brood VIII

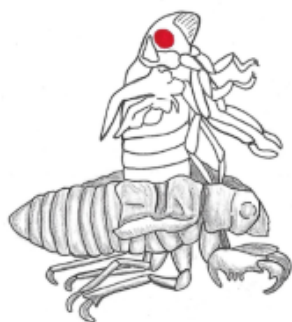
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THE YEAR OF BROOD VIII

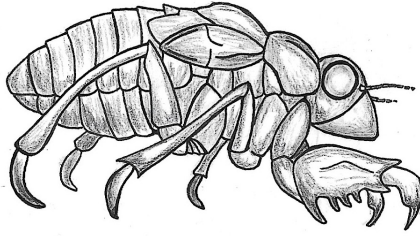


Jona L. Pedersen



Greenway Press

2021 Fiction Contest Winner



The first numbers were prime numbers. All other numbers were created in their image.

They swept across the landscape like the seventh plague of Egypt. They hatched from earth smeared in sunlight. They crawled out of the ground like dead rising from their graves. Threadbare scarecrows faltered when they swarmed the fields. We surrendered our forests, crops, suburbs, swimming pools, homes. The ryegrass shivered as they sang in celebration of their rebirth. Then the cicadas scattered with the warm winds, abandoning the husks of their old skins in their wake.

After seventeen years in darkness, the brood began their re-emergence from their underground tunnels. At my feet, a nymph's body split apart, and a cicada started wriggling through the crack. I squatted down to inspect it. As it erected itself, unfolding its underdeveloped wings, I thought of an angel. It stared at me with crimson eyes. Soon, its newly molted exoskeleton would turn from white to black. For the next few weeks, it would get drunk on tree sap, singing songs that had been passed down for over a million years. Then, at the end of summer, it would die, leaving behind hundreds of eggs. New nymphs would hatch and burrow into the earth. They, too, would sleep for the next seventeen years. I wondered what they dreamed of for so long.

The giant oak tree, corkscrewed like a lighthouse staircase, cast its shadow upon me. Its branches housed several empty crow nests, tangled with silver spoons, lost wedding rings, keys, and jewelry. Cicada tunnels punctured the ground below me like bullet wounds. In this oak-hearted meadow, all those years ago, I had met my first love. I was a college student at the time, doing my first internship. He was a photographer for the local newspaper. In the seventeen years since the birth of the now awakening cicadas, I hadn't set foot here.

Slowly, the cicada slid out from the crack of its shell. Eventually, its wings smoothed down to its sides. "Happy seventeenth birthday," I said. Without acknowledging my congratulations, it crawled towards the tree. Moonlight guided it up the trunk. Memories of our summer together rushed back to me. I imagined us, nestled in the branches of the oak, wearing our thumbs out playing Pokémon Red on the Game Boy. All the while, cicadas called out below. The entire forest sang just for us. But tonight, it sang for no one.

I remembered his words. "When I was little, I used to think that June and July were friends with one another." His fingers ran through my brown, ruffled, hair.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"I mean the months. Like, they have such similar names. June and July." The names rolled in a melody over his tongue. "And every summer, one would follow after the other. I thought it meant that they must be close, right?"

I smiled and leaned over to kiss him. His lips still tasted of the strawberry milkshake we had shared.

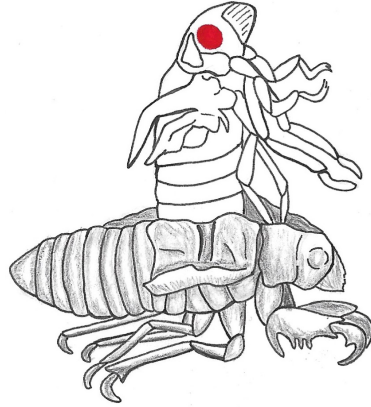
That entire summer I ran around chasing cicadas. Sampling, measuring, weighing, counting. He took photographs and reported back to the newspaper. The times in between belonged to us. Swimming in the river, going to the movies, drinking milkshakes at the Dodo. One night I snuck a telescope out from the observatory which shared facilities with my lab. We had spent the night watching meteor showers. There were so many shooting stars in the sky that I ran out of wishes. What I wanted had already come true.

That summer in 2002, every radio station seemed to play Maroon 5. Once I had finished sampling in the fall and left Ohio, (left him), “The Scientist” by Coldplay was the only song on the radio anymore. Now they played other songs. Only the call of the cicadas hadn’t changed, like static.

I followed the trail back to my pickup truck. I drove to the hotel, located on the border between the woodlands and the town. From there, I had easy access to different terrain types for my research.

My room was on the second floor. Log pillars held up each corner, while the painting above the bed offered a focal point. It portrayed a valley draped in mist, the blurred contours of each brushstroke capturing the illusion of movement. On the nightstand, there was an old rotary phone and an open Bible. The last guest had left annotations on the margins of the pages. I closed it.

As I lay in bed, I lingered on the memories of the summer we had shared. I counted the tree rings of the wooden walls, 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, before drifting into a slumber.



The Ishango bone—a baboon’s fibula attached to a piece of quartz—was discovered in Congo in 1960. The ancient bone was covered in tally marks that represent a series of prime numbers: 11, 13, 17, 19. This evidence suggests that we have been aware of prime numbers for the last 20,000 years, if not longer.

The following morning, I ran into him during the hotel’s continental breakfast. After hovering around the catering tables in indecision, I settled for a bagel and orange juice. I was on my way to the exit when I heard my name called out across the lobby.

“Benny?”

I turned to see George. He stood by the unlit fireplace, remnants of charred wood resting inside of it. I studied him where he leaned against the bricks of the frame. In spite of everything, in spite of all the years that had nurtured the distance between us, it was still George. Wild auburn hair, pale skin sun-kissed with freckles. The old Kodak camera that used to hang around his neck had been replaced by a digital SLR Nikon. But he still tucked his jeans inside of his socks.

“Hi there,” I said after recovering from nearly spilling my orange juice. How long had he been watching me, trying to recognize me? Did he call out immediately, or deliberate with himself? I began to feel acutely self-aware. In my work attire, I appeared half man, half scarecrow; green stained the denim of my overalls from all the time I spent kneeling in the grass, while a wide-brim straw hat complemented the outfit.

“It’s been a minute,” he said.

“Are you here for the paper?”

“National Geographic.” His boyish grin still made me think of the crescent moon.

“Congratulations.” Then he didn’t work for the local newspaper anymore. At least that explained the need for a hotel room.

“Are you here for your research?” he asked.

“That’s right.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t run away to Sweden to start a pill bug farm yet.”

“Pill bugs are crustaceans, not insects.”

“Never mind then.” George straightened up, just enough so that the antlers of the deer head mounted on the wall behind him seemed to align with his own head. “Did you figure out the prime numbers yet?”

Cicadas and their relationship to prime numbers were one of the greatest entomological mysteries. Different species made their appearance at different intervals, whereas my research highlighted the periodical cicadas rather than the annual variety.

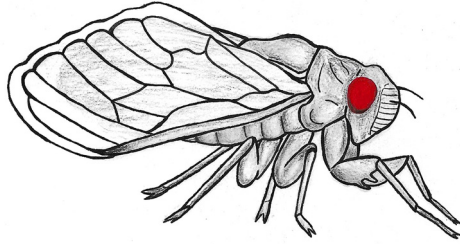
Cicada cycles could last for thirteen or seventeen years—always a prime number, either way. Entomologists speculated that the periods underground had helped them survive glacial periods or evade predators. But I wanted to put the prime numbers to rest once and for all. My internship turned into a dissertation; my dissertation turned into a career. For a decade, I spent every summer in a different state, tracking each brood as they emerged from years in hiding. There were fifteen active broods of seven different species around the country. More than enough to keep my hands full. Until I stopped.

“No, I’ve been working on other projects for a few years. Firefly signaling, colony collapse disorder, ladybug phenotypes. But I’m back now. I guess I wanted to see if the cicadas were doing okay after all this time. We watched them grow up, after all.” This year, I had decided to come back to the place where it all started. As Brood VIII made their return, so did I.

“You know how it is,” he said. “If you keep chasing two rabbits at the same time, both will escape.”

“Since I have so many rabbits to catch, I should probably get moving.”

He grinned. “I’ll see you around, Bunny.” It had been a long time since anyone had called me by the old nickname. I wondered if maybe I had misheard him, if he had really just said Benny, but all this talk about metaphorical rabbits made me think he said bunny instead. It seemed almost mocking. I bid farewell, then left the hotel.



Book IX of the Elements was published around 300 BC by the Greek mathematician Euclid. In his work, Euclid proved that there are an infinite number of primes.

The cicadas multiplied over the next two days. They flooded the fields and hills and streets, distorting the ground. When I left the hotel in the morning, I witnessed a murder of crows hopping across the parking lot. They gathered around a cluster of shrubs, pecking at the leaves and branches, then shrunk back at the screeches which erupted in their faces. Like vultures, the crows hovered around the perimeters of the parking lot, encircling the brood—hungering, cowering, waiting. Eventually, one of them swooped down and snagged a cicada from among the shrubs. Then it took off. The five remaining crows pursued it.

The hotel had set up a souvenir stand in the corner of the parking lot, where tourists, bird watchers, and bug enthusiasts alike could buy anything from cicada plushies to graphic t-shirts stating “*Magiccada septendecim*” and “Brood VIII 2019.” I had just bought a keychain when I ran into George for the second time.

“Classic Benny,” he said and nodded to the keychain in my hand.

“It’s for my co-worker back home,” I explained. “A token of appreciation for watching over my seven-legged pet tarantula while I’m gone.”

“Kudos to them. It would take a lot more than a keychain for me to go anywhere near your little monsters.”

“Her name is Marsenne and she’s not a monster. She’s just misunderstood.”

“Naturally.” A playful smile crossed his lips. “But it’s good we ran into each other again. I wanted to ask you something.”

“What’s up?”

“I was wondering if I could join you on the field today. I need some pictures for my article.”

Without questioning it, I agreed to his proposal. It was only after we started walking that I began to wonder. But any anxieties I had drowned out in the song of the cicadas, their call as oppressive as the summer heat. We headed into the forest, where sunlight filtered through the lush leaves of the treetops.

“What exactly are you researching?” he asked me.

“I’m comparing my new samples to the ones from 2002, but this year I wanted to try something different. I’ve been recording the mating calls, so I can measure the number and length of their chirps.”

“Anything on the primes?”

“Not yet.” I didn’t tell him that prime numbers showed up more often than not. Until I had a better idea of what he was reporting, I didn’t want my speculations out in the world.

For the next hour, I sampled cicadas. I measured the length of the body and the wings, in addition to the tymbals of the males. The tymbals, which produced their song, were located on the abdomen. They vibrated fiercely as I pinched each cicadas' wings. I recorded their Geiger counter calls while George photographed them, searching for the perfect magazine cover shot. He took a picture of me as I faced the river, jotting down numbers in my notebook. Dragonflies skimmed the water's surface behind me.

My startled look made him chuckle. "Kodak moment," George explained.

"Nikon moment," I corrected. But I didn't ask about the fate of his old camera. I didn't ask about the seventeen years that had passed.

Once the sun dipped below the horizon, we headed into town for dinner. We used the map in Pokémon Go to find our way around, looking for the old café—the Dodo—that we once frequented. It seemed to me that the neighborhoods had shifted around. The movie theatre that used to be on the same street corner as the church now stood next to a pool, rearranged like panels on a Rubik's cube. George reassured me that it had always been this way.

"I could have sworn it was around here," he said.

"It was." I pointed to a Starbucks. We had already passed by it three times before I realized that it had replaced the Dodo. We went inside and made our orders. The background chatter of the guests merged with "Fireflies" by Owl City on the radio. Although the café had been rebranded, some of the former interior remained intact; paper lanterns hung from the ceiling and

chalkboard plastered the walls. Each table was supplied with a jar of chinks.

While we waited for our orders, we settled down in an empty corner of the café. I picked out an orange chalk from the jar. I began drawing on the walls, filling in the spaces between heart-eclipsed initials, Pinterest quotes, and various pet portraits signed by the employees. In a series of swift motions, I summoned a cicada to my fingertips.

“Not bad,” George commented.

“I sketch a lot in the field.” I switched to a green chalk and proceeded to draw the oak tree next to the cicada.

“A broccoli?”

“No, it’s the oak.” I rolled my eyes, but, when George chuckled, I couldn’t suppress my smile. “I went down there the other day. The night before you found me,” I confessed. “Do you remember it?”

“I do,” he said.

Before I could respond, a barista halted by our table. He carried a tray with some empty paper cups and dirty wipes. With a glance at my doodles, he commented, “You like cicadas?”

“Liking is an understatement,” George said.

“I study them,” I clarified.

“Oh, really? Then would you know why they come around so suddenly?” the barista asked.

George shot me a warning glance. “Well, why do you?” he intercepted before I could launch into a lecture.

“I work here,” he said flatly. He looked over to my drawings again, then gestured to the tree. “Either way, you better beware of the old oak.”

“You recognize it?” I said.

“The twists and turns of the branches are quite distinct, wouldn’t you say so?”

“So what’s wrong with it?”

“Supposedly, the tree is a portal to another world. Cursed, some say.” The barista spoke with a glimmer in his eyes, as if he always told ghost stories to customers for his own amusement.

“A vacation to another world doesn’t sound too bad.”

“Very well then. Enjoy your cicadas.” He continued in his trajectory through the café, stopping a few tables over. He began cleaning up after a couple of guests who had just left.

“How odd,” I said once he was out of earshot.

“I’ve never heard that one before,” George admitted.

“But aren’t you local?” I teased.

“Not anymore.”

Our names were called out. I got up, more abruptly than I should have, and retrieved our frappuccinos from the counter. I set the cups down at the table. After I settled down again, we were swathed in silence. I sipped from the drink. The taste was tainted by the memories of the Dodo’s milkshakes. If George

shared my review, his expression remained indecipherable. I took a deep breath. Then I finally voiced the question that had been burning through my throat, like anaphylaxis after the bee's sting. "Where did you go, all this time?"

"I've been all over. Writing, photographing."

"Did you ever settle down?"

"Never really stayed anywhere for long enough," he said.

"Why did you come back here?"

"Geographic wanted an article about the cicadas."

"Surely they want articles about many things."

"Then maybe I wanted something." He paused. "Remember the time capsule?"

"I forgot," I admitted. The day before my internship ended, we had buried a small wooden chest by the foot of the old oak tree. I only recalled a handful of its contents; a pair of movie tickets for something I couldn't remember anymore, a newspaper clipping of one of George's articles, a mixtape, a fortune cookie prediction, and a broken promise.

"You forgot a lot of things."

"I'm sorry."

He let out a sigh. "For a scientist, you can be pretty dumb sometimes."

"Apropos, here's a dumb idea," I said. "Come with me to the old oak. We can still dig up the time capsule."

“You’re right. Two men digging a hole in the forest is pretty dumb.”

“And?”

“I’m in.” He raised his frappuccino in a toast.

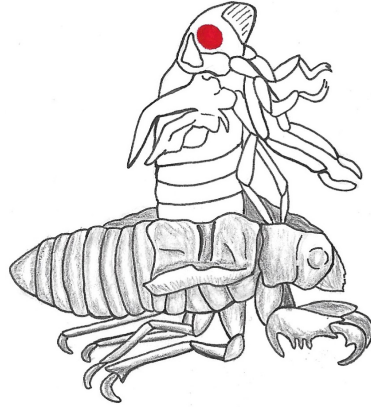
“Cheers,” I said, mimicking the gesture. When he stole a glance at me, the disappointing taste didn’t seem to matter anymore. I erased the oak tree on the wall and drew Marsenne instead, allowing my tarantula to join the ranks of the other pet portraits—there was Musti the cat, Ares the betta, Mo the rat, Brodir the pony. And Marsenne the tarantula.

After finishing our drinks, we continued to play Pokémon Go, slowly circling back to the hotel. We paused by a Pokéstop beneath a highway tunnel. The walls were covered in layers of graffiti and empty cicada shells. Under the cascading light of the fluorescent tubes, George spun his index finger around the phone screen. He caught a Gengar. I caught a Ninjask. A swarm of moths rammed their heads into the lights above us. He looked at me. I wrestled my brain for a way to break the sudden silence, for something to say that would make him smile. When I didn’t, he smiled anyway. There was only the humming of the fluorescents, the thuds of the colliding moths.

Once we exited the tunnel, an orchestra of cicadas burst into song. We picked up the conversation where we had left it, arguing about whether or not Team Instinct or Mystic was better. By the time we returned to the hotel, we had yet to reach a conclusion. We exchanged our goodnights in the hallway, then went to our separate rooms. I headed to the bathroom. When I brushed my

teeth, I discovered a cicada in the bathroom sink. I released it through the window.

As I lay down in bed, I thought about George. How his voice was soft like honey. How he had laughed when I told him that I spent my childhood painting beetles with nail polish so I could track them around the neighborhood—color coding, numbering, naming them. How I would like to hear that laugh again.



In 1846, the French mathematician Alphonse de Polignac asserted that there are an infinite number of primes which exist only two numbers apart. This is known as the twin prime conjecture.

A couple of days passed by before we ventured back into the woods, armed with shovels. George walked a few paces ahead of me. His camera bag hung from his shoulder, resting at his hip. The sluggish flow of the river guided us forward. The water seemed shallower than I remembered it.

A rustle in the leaves drew my attention. I turned to look in the direction of the sound. On the other side of the river, a creature emerged between a weeping willow's draping leaves. While I had never seen anything like it before, its individual features were familiar to me. It looked like parts of several different animals patchworked together. It was the size of a dog but appeared neither canine nor feline. It dipped its possum-like snout into the water, drinking greedily. The ears were round like a bear's, but its body was much leaner. It had a pale brown coat with white stripes running down its back to its rat-like tail.

Turning my head slowly, I looked for George. I had lost sight of him. Footsteps moved further up the path, growing quieter with distance. I resisted the urge to call out for him in case I scared off the chimeric creature. Instead, I reached for my pocket, carefully, and grabbed my cellphone. I aimed the phone camera towards the animal. But just as I tapped the screen, it faded to black. I pressed the power button without result. Drained battery.

“George?” My voice was between whispering and speaking. The sound prompted the animal to leap into the trees. It disappeared, heading deeper into the woods—in the direction of the old oak tree. I stood still for a few minutes, staring across the river, as if I could will it to come back. The song of the cicadas drowned out the murmurs of the stream.

George reappeared by my side. “What’s up?”

“Did you see that?”

“See what?” His head turned like an owl as he surveyed the area.

“There was some kind of animal over there.” I pointed to the other side of the river. The duckweed had dispersed where the creature had been drinking.

“What animal?”

“Maybe a dog or something.”

“Let’s keep an eye out,” George said. He looked at me now. “Might be lost.”

We followed the river until we encountered a bridge. Moss and mushrooms had taken hold between the bricks. A turtle drifted below it as we crossed. We pressed on, farther into the woods.

About an hour later, we reached the oak. I noticed how much it had grown since 2002. It towered above the rest of the trees, as if the forest itself had shied away from it, abandoning it to the meadow.

“Do you remember where we buried it?” I asked.

“Somewhere around there, I think.” He gestured vaguely towards a cluster of roots. They surfaced above ground and disappeared below like the body of the Loch Ness monster.

“Maybe,” I muttered. We began the excavation, digging as carefully and methodically as archaeologists, trying not to damage the intricate system of roots. An hour went by where we didn’t find anything. Except for the cicadas pouring out from the holes we dug.

We took a break. George climbed the tree with the dexterity of an acrobat. He nested himself in the space where the branches split off from the trunk. I passed my water bottle to him. With my back against the tree, I slid down into a sitting position on the ground below him.

“Do you think the tree’s curse got to us?” he said after a long sip.

“How come?”

“Maybe things would have been different if we had buried the time capsule somewhere else. If we hadn’t buried our memories at all.”

“There’s no such thing as a cursed tree.”

“But what if there is?”

I looked up at him, unable to see his face through the branches. “Did I ever tell you about Socrates’ myth about the cicadas?”

“You didn’t.”

“Supposedly, cicadas were once humans who were transformed by divine beings. These beings granted them with the ability of singing from birth to death, never needing food or sleep. They became messengers of the gods. They became cicadas.” I ran my fingers through the grass, when my hand encountered a cicada. I pinched its wings. It rattled back at me. “Philosophers debate whether or not this was a curse or blessing. I’m not a philosopher. I’m an entomologist. But sometimes I think that maybe the cicadas were the lucky ones, and the rest of us were cursed. This tree isn’t going to make a difference.” As I said the last part, I patted the trunk of the tree with my cicada-free hand. The bark felt coarse against my skin.

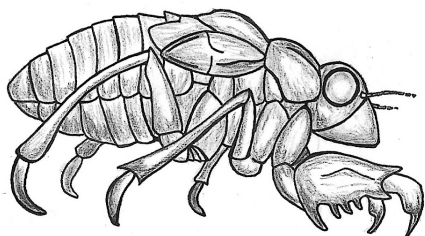
“How do you keep going if you think everyone is cursed?” George said.

The cicada propelled itself from my hand. Grass engulfed its body. I rose to my feet, grabbed a branch above me, and hoisted myself up into the tree. My legs dangled in the air. I glanced at George. The brim of his cap covered his eyes. “I look at the cicadas. And I look at prime numbers. And I think that if I figure it all out, maybe I can beat it, this thing we call life, cursed or not.”

“It’s not like a video game. It’s not something you can beat,” George said.

“That’s not what I meant.”

Neither of us said anything else. We listened to the choir of cicadas around us, singing a secret language only shared with the gods. Were they generously gifting their divine melody to us, or teasing us with our own ignorance? Lingering on this question, we continued to dig around the tree. There was no sign of the time capsule. No sign of the strange animal I thought I had seen.



The Ulam spiral was devised by Stanislaw Ulam in 1963. When numbers are written in a spiral, prime numbers will align with one another diagonally, whereas certain diagonals have a higher concentration of primes.

The sun balanced on the horizon like a tightrope walker. We returned to our respective hotel rooms. My phone still wasn't working, so I plugged it into the charger. I seated myself in bed, cushioning my back with a pillow. Then I opened Google on my laptop.

I typed into the search bar:

Zoo animal escapes. There were no Harambes on the loose.

Cryptids in the Midwest. Mothman. Bigfoot. Loveland Frogman. Giant white wolves. But no chimeras.

Animals that don't exist... Google filled in the blank for me: *...anymore.*

My search yielded passenger pigeons, Pyrenean ibexes, West African black rhinoceroses. I had only been browsing for a minute when I found a picture that matched the creature I had seen. It was a Tasmanian tiger. The last Tasmanian tiger had died at a zoo in 1936. His name was the same as mine—Benjamin.

I wondered about Benjamin, my name twin, and what it must have been like to be the last of your kind. Had he known that he was alone? I couldn't explain how, but out there in the woods, I had seen a living breathing Tasmanian tiger. Almost a century since the species went extinct, thousands of miles away from its natural habitat in Australia. Maybe life could endure even the greatest loneliness. Maybe there could be more of them, somewhere out there. Maybe nothing ever truly dies.

In my notebook, I started sketching the Tasmanian tiger drinking from the river. A ringing sound like an old school bell interrupted me midway through the drawing. It was the telephone on the nightstand. With its rotary dial, the phone looked like it was from a different decade. I picked up the sleek, black, receiver.

“Hello?” I said.

The other end of the line was as quiet as a grave.

“Who's there?” I persisted.

There was a low screech. Like the call of a cicada. It crescendoed. Then I felt something wet against my ear. I pulled the receiver away. There was a splatter of red liquid on the speaker. I reached for my ear. A trace of red smudged my fingertips. Although I couldn't feel any pain, my ear must have started to bleed. Could the noise have ruptured my eardrum? Even with the phone away from my ear, the screeching remained distinctly audible.

Clutching the receiver, I stared. Blood seeped from it, thick like honey. I watched as it slowly poured out from the needle-sized holes on the speaker, followed by the mouthpiece. It wasn't coming from my ear. As the blood reached my hand, trickling

down my wrist, I let go. The receiver hung from the nightstand by its cord. Blood continued to drip from the speaker.

My notebook fell to the floor as I leaped out of the bed. I staggered towards the door, then slammed it behind me. Like a moth to the flame, I stumbled towards the exit sign glowing red at the end of the hallway. The air was sucked out of the building. I was on the Titanic as it sank to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. But there was no ensemble that could play louder than the echo of the cicadas.

The door to room 223 creaked open when I passed by.

“Benny?” I turned to see George’s head poke out from the room. His hair was ruffled, in his signature bedhead kind of way. “I heard noises. What’s going on?” he said.

“I don’t know.”

“What’s the matter? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” He blinked three times in succession, then cleared his throat.

“A ghost?” I laughed. “The rainforests are burning down to ashes. Our government preys on sacred grounds as we watch. The voices of a million angry children are chanting in the streets. Thousands of species go extinct every year, and when there is nothing else left, the cicadas will go to sleep underground. Who knows how long it will take before they wake up again. The largest known prime number has 23 million digits. They could outlive the universe, hiding underground. But whenever they choose to wake up again, it will already be too late for us.” I turned away from him. “Yes, George, I see ghosts every day.”

Heartbeats passed by in silence. Then he said, “You’re bleeding.” The blood from the phone had stained my ear and hand.

“It’s nothing.”

“I’ll take you to a doctor.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“At the very least, come in. Please.”

I followed him inside. His suitcase was neatly packed in the corner of the room, contrasting the clutter of various camera lenses and equipment on the table. He had hung his baseball cap over the tripod by the window. Photoshop was open on his laptop, midway through editing a picture of a cicada evacuating its shell. The creature reached for the sky, its body imitating a white cross.

George disappeared into the bathroom. I waited at the edge of his bed. He came back with a towel, then wiped away the blood. “Finishing touch,” he warned before planting a swift kiss on my hands. Just as I thought my heart couldn’t go any faster, it did.

“I think you’re supposed to save that for CPR,” I said.

“Better safe than sorry.”

An ephemeral smile crossed my lips. “I saw something impossible today.”

“What was it?”

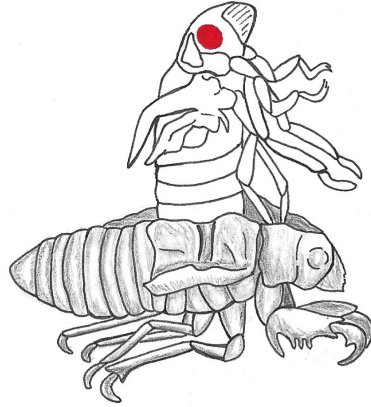
“I don’t know how to explain.”

“It’s okay. You can rest now.”

I lay down. George lay down next to me. I didn't notice that my body had been shaking until he wrapped his arms around me, in a firm but tender grip. "Bunny, it's not too late," he murmured. "We're not ghosts yet."

Resting my head on his chest, I listened to his heartbeat. The rhythm was steady as an ocean. It reminded me of my first dissection in a high school biology lab. The class had picked apart frogs with scalpels, exposing each part of their amphibian anatomy. It was with a sense of horror and sadistic thrill that I dismembered my frog. After I sliced its chest open, the heart was still beating. My hands were fickle like dynamite, but I managed to cut it into seven delicate pieces. I recalled how each individual part continued to beat steadily. The teacher had explained that the heartbeat was regulated by the cells, allowing it to continue to beat after death. After being removed from the body. After being cut apart. Lying in George's arms, I thought that my heart was not like an ocean. It was a dissected frog's: scattered and incessant.

I counted each beat of his ocean heart, 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, and fell asleep.



In 1974, a radio message was broadcast into space by the Arecibo telescope in Puerto Rico. When translated from number to graphics, the interstellar message portrays the image of the telescope itself, a human, the solar system, and a DNA molecule. The rows and columns were arranged into prime numbers, so that in the event of extraterrestrial life receiving the message, they may be able to decipher it.

I surrendered to sleep. The Tasmanian tiger led me through the wooded depths of my dreams. It weaved through the undergrowth, snapping its curved fangs at the cicadas as they soared with the breeze. The sky flamed red. When I caught up to the chimera, its amber stare trapped me. It had guided me to the old oak tree. In my dream, the oak had grown gigantic, standing taller than mountains. I reached towards it. Then I stirred.

Light trickled in through the window. The white light of the sun alerted me to the time—it must have been past noon already. I was still wearing yesterday's outfit: a pair of cargo shorts and my biology department's custom-made bowling team shirt.

George sat by the table, editing photos on his computer. I could smell the coffee from the thermos he sipped from. He turned his attention to me as I sat up.

“After a long and cruel winter, the Benjamin finally wakes up from his hibernation,” George said in an unforgivable David Attenborough impression.

“Morning.” My voice sounded hoarse.

“Good morning, Bunnyhop.”

“I’m sorry about all of this.”

“It’s alright,” he reassured me. “Did you sleep okay?”

“Yeah,” I said, rubbing my eyes. “What time is it?”

“3:13.”

“Fuck.”

“Might as well have been seventeen years.” He stifled a chuckle.

“I’m not in the mood,” I groaned.

“On that note, I got take-out earlier. It’s not exactly breakfast, but do you like Taco Bell?”

“I need to work.”

“Please rest a little. Get some food.”

I sat up.

“The cicadas aren’t going anywhere,” George continued.

My will to get out of bed dissipated. “Fine.” I accepted the take-out. Just as I unwrapped a burrito, a cicada sprung out

like a jack-in-the-box. We both stared at it. The cicada jumped across the room. Cheese sauce smeared its wings.

“You know what, why don’t we go somewhere in town and grab lunch?” George suggested.

“Good idea.” Although I made no comment, take-out would always falter in comparison to my grandmother’s homemade tortillas.

We wandered the town together with no destination in mind. Aside from the occasional comment on the landmarks of his youth—the newspaper’s office, arcade venue, botanical garden, wishing fountain—George didn’t say much. I recognized how the things left unspoken contaminated his speech, how shapes of myself formed and mutated in the gaps. But he held his tongue about last night. And I held mine. I flicked a quarter into the fountain, startling the seven mourning doves perched on the marble basin. The quarter joined the shimmering blanket of coins at the bottom. A drowned cicada floated among the dandelion seeds on top.

“What did you wish for?” George asked. The doves whizzed past him in a blur of brown.

“If I tell you, it won’t come true.”

“Let me know when it does, then.”

As we drifted along the streets, I glimpsed a tail disappearing into a building. The sign above the door informed me that we had arrived at the Museum of Big Friends. Although I had only glimpsed the tail for a split second before the door closed behind it, it looked striped, like the Tasmanian tiger’s.

“Well? Are you just going to stand there and stare or do you want to go in?” George asked when I stopped in front of the building.

“Did we ever go here before?” I said.

“Not that I can remember. I think this is new.”

“Should we check it out?”

“Why not?”

A bell chimed above the door as we entered. The sound was followed by the receptionist’s greeting, “Welcome to the Museum of Big Friends.”

George turned to her. “Is this the big friend?” He nodded towards a service dog. The dog lay stretched out in front of the counter, resting its head in its paws. Its coat was brindle-colored, giving the tail a striped appearance which I had misidentified as the Tasmanian tiger. The deceiving tail wagged slightly when George spoke.

“This is a megafauna exhibit,” the receptionist said matter-of-factly.

“Big friends indeed,” I remarked. My initial disappointment was replaced with endearment for the way George’s expression softened when he looked at the dog.

“Feel free to ask questions as you look around.” She gestured to a hallway. Two skeletons standing face-to-face—a saber-toothed cat and dire wolf—guarded the entrance. I thanked the receptionist, then paid her the five dollars for the tickets. As George passed by the skeletons, he allowed his hand to glide

through the open space where the wolf's jaws parted. It didn't bite. A good sign, if it had been a *Bocca della Verità*. But it was just a fossil. I followed him farther into the museum.

A mural stretched across the walls and ceiling of the hallway. Giant beasts walked beside us: bison galloping across fields, beavers constructing dams, stags clashing their antlers. A timeline was painted into the empty space of the sky. It graphed the temperature over the last half-million years, each drop indicating a glacial period. The extinctions of various species were mapped across the timeline. Like headstones, their names marked their disappearances. A cluster appeared around 10,000 years ago at the end of the Pleistocene. As we approached the end of the hallway—and the present time—my eyes lingered on the rising temperature graph and the constellation of extinctions.

The hallway opened into a dome lit by a chandelier. The structure reminded me of a ballroom, its dancers replaced by a troupe of fossils. To compensate for the dim lighting, spotlights pointed at the different skeletons scattered around the room. The assortment of bones composed familiar shapes: felines, canines, bears, beavers, deer. But when I saw them standing next to taxidermy of their modern counterparts, I felt small. I stayed close to George.

“This place is giving me *déjà vu* vibes.” His voice echoed slightly. He stopped to face a mastodon in the center of the exhibit. I stopped next to him. We were alone with the three-meter-tall skeleton. It was similar to a mammoth, although it had straighter tusks. A plaque at its feet informed us that it was once believed to be carnivorous due to its sharp teeth.

“Isn’t déjà vu what happens when your mind is lagging behind your body, so your thoughts are trying to catch up?”

“I’m not a fan,” he said. “What if I came here in a past life, or in a dream?”

“I had a dream last night.”

“About?”

“That animal I saw.”

“What happened?”

“I was in the woods. The animal was with me. It seemed like it wanted to show me something, but then I woke up.”

“Show you what?”

“I don’t know.” There was a pause. The silence was as heavy as if we were the fossils, becoming one with the exhibit. I forced myself to continue. “It wasn’t just some animal, George. It sounds crazy but I know exactly what it was.”

“You can tell me.”

“A Tasmanian tiger. They became extinct in 1936. But that’s what I saw.”

“Strange.”

“That’s one way to put it.”

“No, that’s not what I meant.”

“Then what?”

He took a step closer towards the mastodon. I waited for his reply. Just as I thought he had forgotten about the question, he finally spoke up. “In 2011, I traveled around the Galápagos Islands. It was my first assignment for Geographic. I wrote an article about Lonesome George. The last known Pinta Island tortoise.”

“Didn’t he die?” I asked.

“Yes, the following year. I remember driving home when something appeared on the road. It was a giant tortoise, which didn’t make sense since I lived in Washington at the time. I stopped my car to let it cross. I thought that maybe it had escaped from a zoo at first, but when I looked closer, I saw that its shell was covered in jewels, like a Fabergé egg. I thought that maybe it came from a circus or something, but there were no reports like that in the area. It looked just like Lonesome George. The following day, the old tortoise passed away. It was all over the news. I’ve never been able to really explain what I saw. And I never saw it again.”

When he finished speaking, I found myself closer to him, holding his hand. I couldn’t tell if I had taken his in mine or the other way around. His grip was steady as a mountain. “I believe you,” I said.

“What do you think it means?”

I inspected the mastodon skeleton as if it could give me the answers. Its ten-thousand-year-old gaze had the same glimmer as the most distant starlight—there but elsewhere, fragments of the past, dead on arrival. When I peered into its empty eye sockets, a cicada crawled out from the darkness. “I don’t know yet, but

maybe there's a way to find out. I need to look for the Tasmanian tiger." I let go of George's hand and started towards the exit.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I'll come back."

"You said that last time."

My steps came to a halt. I turned back to him. "This time I promise. I will come back."

"Wait."

"If I don't go now, I don't know if I'll ever be able to."

"Why do you have to leave?"

"I need to do this."

"Please stay. If only a little longer."

"Okay." I inhaled. I felt like an earthworm coming up for air during a rainstorm.

There was space for his voice in the silence that ensued. He said, "When I met you 17 years ago, I really liked you. I used to think that another person would make me happy. The older I get, the more I realize that it's something I have to do for myself. But when I was around you, somehow, I felt as if the pieces were coming together. And when you left, it was like I had been reading a new book for the first time, except that once I got to the middle, the rest of the pages were blank. That was a long time ago. And I have lived through many stories since then. But now that we are at the beginning again, I don't want to go through the same thing. This time, I'm not leaving any pages blank."

“This time, things will be different,” I said.

There was a flicker of uncertainty in his sea-green gaze. “How do you know?”

“This time, I have a choice.” I ran my fingers through the curls of his hair. The action came to me so naturally, as if the gap between all those years had closed, as if the oceans had retreated and Pangaea became whole again. His gaze softened. Then I kissed him. I kissed his forehead, his lips, the sparrow-shaped birthmark on his neck, all the places he needed to heal. I kissed him and kissed him. Then we stood there, in front of the ten-thousand-year-old mastodon skeleton, glancing shyly at one another as if we had never kissed anyone in our lives.

I broke the silence. “Maybe wishes do come true.”

“Is that so?”

“But there’s still something I need to do.”

“You don’t have to figure it out alone.”

“Maybe. But this, I have to do it for myself.”

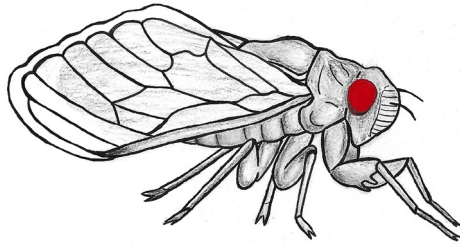
“Okay.”

“I need to get my truck at the hotel. Do you want to walk with me?”

“Go ahead. I need a minute.”

“I’ll see you later, then.”

He took my hand again, squeezed it gently, as if sealing the promise. I left him at the museum.



As of the Year of Brood VIII, the largest known prime number was discovered by a FedEx employee running a software on a church's computer in Tennessee. The prime has 23 million digits.

My truck waited for me in the hotel parking lot. I drove through valleys speckled in purple and blue wildflowers. Once I reached the outskirts of the woods, I retrieved an axe from the trunk. It had been lying there ever since I chopped down a Christmas tree last winter. Axe wielded, I marched into the heart of the forest.

The further in I got, the louder the cicadas became. Sweat trickled down my neck, and my temples ached by the time I made it to the old oak tree. Its evening shadow engulfed me, showering Rorschach ink blots on the ground. The screeches of the cicadas swelled as their black shapes writhed in the grass.

I lifted the axe above my head. I swung it into the oak tree. Silver spoons and jewelry rattled in the crow nests above. The blade chipped away at the bark. Blood began to drip from where I struck. I continued to strike at the tree while blood trickled steadily down the trunk. The watercolor sky faded from blue to orange to red. I kept going as my palms blistered. As the tree

bled. I kept going as my shoulders ached. And the sky bled. I kept going. The cicadas wept.

I had lost track of time when the old oak finally fell. It crashed into the earth with a rumble like thunder. The air stirred, hushing the cicadas. They fled in every direction. Silence swept through the forest.

I studied the exposed wood of the tree stump. The growth rings were thin and even, unnaturally so. I counted them. 223 rings. A prime number. I stared into the center, the heartwood, where blood continued to seep. Then I reached my hand into it. The liquid felt warm against my skin. My fingertips encountered something soft, yet solid. Blood pooled in my palm as I extracted the thing from the heartwood. It was worm-like with six legs. Its body squirmed in my hand, throbbing like a pulse. Its tarsal claws dug into my skin. It was a cicada nymph. It looked at me with crimson eyes.

Jona L. Pedersen

Jona L. Pedersen grew up in Norway, but has since relocated to the US where they are pursuing English and biology at the University of North Dakota. They are the recipient of the Thomas McGrath Award (2020) and their work appears in *Floodwall Magazine*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *The Allegheny Review*. When they aren't studying or writing, they like to explore the outdoors, roll dice with friends, and create art. Other passions such as wildlife biology, entomology, and environmental justice also inspire their writing. Their favorite insect changes every month, but it is often the ladybug or, of course, the cicada.

Learn more about Jona's work at www.jonalpedersen.com