**Self Portrait with Crickets**

Christopher Overfelt

Nerves wind through tissue, spreading creeping tendrils around bone and arteries, through muscle and fat and down into fingers and toes. Like ivy on a tree, they climb and branch out, extending their fingers into all quarters of the body. They pulsate and ache, causing muscles to twitch and flesh to burn.

Perched between bone and muscle, a cricket gnaws quietly on a nerve. It is a small cricket with brown leathery skin over its wings. Its antennae are finer than hair and they waver like radio signals from its head. As its mandibles pinch the nerve, a tingle runs down Christopher’s hand and stings his cold fingers. They are numb and translucent white, wrapped tightly around the cold metal chains of the swing. But he holds on tightly as the swing rises and falls like a pendulum, and, leaning back in the seat, the blood rushes to his head as he is tipped upside down.

He feels as if the swing will never stop rising, carrying him into the dark gray clouds that blanket the sky. He imagines being placed there like a knickknack on a shelf, looking down on the little backyard with an oak tree and a chain link fence rotting around its edges.

Inside the house, his father lies sleeping on the bed. He lies on his side with his hand between his cheek and the pillow, which is wet with saliva that leaks from his slack mouth. A Christopher sized hole takes shape between his elbow and knees, a favorite place for his son to snuggle. He smells like damp skin. At the end of the bed, a baseball game drones quietly on the television.

Outside, Christopher’s momentum slows and the swing stutters and pauses before beginning its long descent. For a moment, Christopher is suspended from all time and space on his swing as he floats a millimeter off the seat. In that fractional space is a void that separates him from the boy that swings next to him. His name is Andrew, and down his cold face, a river of snot runs from his nostrils and streaks his cheeks. He talks excitedly of a boy who was thrown from his swing and impaled on the gate of a fence.

“All of his arteries came out of him and he went limp as a noodle,” he yells to Christopher, running his tongue along his upper lip to collect the snot gathering there.

“I don’t have any arteries,” Christopher yells back. “I’m full up on crickets. If I get stabbed it’s just crickets coming out of me.”

The cricket that is perched on Christopher’s scapular is now floating, too, as Christopher begins his fall to earth. Its hooked hind legs lift from the bone and its body rotates in the space between muscle and ligament. With his head laid back, Christopher’s face rushes towards the earth and he feels as if it will smash into the bare patch of ground beneath the swing. But he laughs wildly when the slack chains pull tight and his guts drop inside him as he is lifted back up, saved from the solid ground and rocketed toward the sky.

The little swing set groans with the boys’ pendulous weight while a cold wind pulls on the branches of the oak tree, showering the back yard in a whirlwind of dead leaves. They scatter and gather in the corners of the chain link fence, drifting into long swales that pile high like snow.

Inside the house, Christopher’s father is sitting up in bed. His heart is pounding, and the sheets are soaked with sweat. He has been dreaming that he was sitting on Christopher’s chest with his legs crossed. Only he was crushing him, and from Christopher’s smashed ribs poured out a flood of crickets. Little brown crickets. With his wrist, he wipes the saliva from his cheek. The house is quiet save for the droning of the television at the end of the bed.

Meanwhile, Christopher eyes a soft pile of leaves in front of him and launches himself from the swing, carrying in a long arc across the yard before disappearing into the pile. At the bottom of the leaves is his own dream and Christopher slips into it like a fish into water. It is a dark dream, inky black, and he struggles through it as if it is a viscous fluid.

He and Andrew are wrapped in a blanket like a cocoon and they are naked and cold. They rub their smooth bodies together to warm their skin. Deep in Christopher’s shoulder socket, the cricket is lodged in a cavity of bone where it vibrates its wings, rasping a set of teeth one across another. As Christopher feels Andrew penetrate him, a fine, dark antenna emerges from an incision in his stomach. Another waving antenna emerges and then a head behind it attached to a thorax with creeping legs.

Christopher wakes from the dream with a jolt. His long frame spans the length of the couch on which he lies and as he sits up, the vinyl fabric peels from his skin like Velcro. Sweat pools in the creases of the cushions, and at the end of the couch a baseball game drones on the television. His fingernails have grown discolored and the top of his head shows signs of male pattern baldness. He realizes there are no crickets, and he realizes that he has wasted his life dreaming of them.