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Breathless Sleep

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Author Bio

Karl is an English major with a Writing concentration from the Dominican Republic. He interned for The Gettysburg Review last fall and has been part of The Mercury staff for the last three years. He hopes to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing in the future.

Breathless Sleep

Karl Utermohlen

Even before I knew it, I've always had a special relationship with death. From an early age, I always had questions regarding mortality. I wondered where one went after dying, when I would die, how I would die, whether or not I should be scared, and whether or not it would be a sweet release from life. I've known I am an atheist from a young age, so I'm positive that death is the end of it all, yet my fear of dying has diminished throughout the years because of how helpless we are when facing the Reaper.

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

-From "Macbeth" Act V Scene V by William Shakespeare

Some of my earlier memories in life are very foggy, yet the emotions that overwhelmed my life in certain moments are as vivid as any moment I have experienced in the last two minutes. One day, when I was six years old, my neck really started to hurt. I felt a throbbing pain on the left side of my neck which manifested itself in the form of a hard, swollen ball. I didn't think much of it until I talked to my mom about it. She decided that the rational thing to do was to take me to the doctor to get it checked out. All of a sudden, fear and anxiety took control of my entire existence like a horde of hellhounds surrounding and taunting me, showing off their sharp set of teeth.

I found out what was wrong with me only a couple of nights later, but it felt like an eon and a half. A wave of insomnia crept up inside of me during those dark nights in the form of tall, loud wooden drums in a cold, desolate wasteland where no light shone from the sky. The day finally came; I was probably going to be fine according to the doctor. I had a swollen lymph node that might require surgery in order to excise it, and this scared my mother, but for some reason, it didn't sound that bad to me. I felt a sense of comfort knowing that I could get that small beast out of my life

and move on. And then it got even better—after running some more tests, the doctor realized that it wasn't as bad as he had thought. I would need no surgery, only antibiotics. It didn't even seem like a threat anymore, simply a part of my body that was swollen. My older brother had a cast at the time because he had broken his arm, and I saw what I had as something similar. Yes, that's what I had, it was simply a broken bone that needed some time to heal. Those thoughts of death were nothing but mind games I had played upon myself by obsessing over absolutely nothing. I was going to be fine, right?

*And I, tiny being,
drunk with the great starry
void,
likeness, image of
mystery,
felt myself a pure pure part
of the abyss,
I wheeled with the stars,
My heart broke loose with the wind*

-From "Poetry" by Pablo Neruda.

Even though I would be fine with antibiotics, I had to go to the hospital for a few days so my doctor could monitor my progress and make sure that nothing went wrong. I was hooked up to an IV, and I was getting a steady dose of antibiotics to treat my illness, as well as some relatively harmless drugs in order to fight any side effects that the antibiotics might have. I felt great. I was well on my path to recovery, and I had a staff of nurses and both of my parents tending to my every need. I did not feel the banging of the wooden drums anymore—instead I felt a light, cool breeze relaxing my tense muscles, and all I could hear was a steady, unchanging stream in the distance that filled me with absolute peace and tranquility. My serene voyage would soon be disturbed by one small pill. I woke up with a really bad migraine the next day, so one of the nurses gave me some aspirin to relieve my pain. I had never tried anything but Tylenol to combat headaches until this moment, and I never had any side effects from it. I thought I was leaving that hospital that day, but instead I took an Advil and signed my death sentence.

Never in a million years would I have imagined that people could be allergic to aspirin. I was a young boy with his entire life ahead of him, but then I saw a scythe. My lips started to feel puffy, and my doctor im-

mediately picked up on the fact that I was having an allergic reaction to the Advil, but it didn't stop there. My lips were not only swollen, they were huge. In what was probably only ten minutes, my face was bloated, and I was having a harder time breathing. This was no mere allergic reaction, this was my immune system completely failing to control the swelling. My doctor realized this, and he ran out to find a cortisone shot as fast as was humanly possible. I was having a harder time breathing and I was completely aware of what was going on - my throat was closing in on itself. If I had spent another half hour without some medicine to combat the reaction that the aspirin had provoked in my body, my throat was going to be sealed shut and I would have choked to death. All of a sudden, everything was in slow motion, like in the movies. I was super conscious of everything that was going on around me. I could hear my mother yelling at the nurses to do something about my situation as they tried to contact the doctor who had left in order to see what was taking so long. I knew this was it, my time had come, and I wasn't even old enough to fully realize what this meant. Nevertheless, I felt at peace with myself. The fear I had felt was overtaken by complete peace. I closed my eyes and decided to wait it out without freaking out. About fifteen minutes later, the doctor walked in with a needle full of a clear liquid that would save my life. He applied the cortisone shot in me, and I was completely fine within five minutes. I felt the greatest sense of relief I have ever felt in my entire life, and this too-vivid experience somehow became over time a distant memory...or so I thought.

By the time I was finishing my sophomore year of college, I had long forgotten the Advil incident that almost claimed my life. Nevertheless, my mortality was a topic I always thought about for some reason. I didn't think harm would come my way, but I couldn't help thinking about what it would be like to experience death.

The Reaper is ugly and menacing. He stares directly at us, and with an outstretched bony finger, he beckons us to come to him. He is patient. If we escape today, surely he will have us tomorrow. He is democratic. He takes all; high and low alike will be 'harvested' when the time comes. He is unforgiving. Once we are in his grasp, there is no return.

-From "Confrontations with the Reaper" by Fred Feldman (3).

Spring of 2010 was one of the happiest semesters of my life, but it ended on a somewhat bitter note. I made a ton of friends, I was doing well in class, and I finally knew what I wanted to do with my life. However, in mid-April of that year, only two weeks before the semester ended, I did some philanthropy yard work with my fraternity on a hot Saturday after-

noon for about five hours. Needless to say, I was pretty sore after all that physical work. The next day I woke up with a horrible pain in the left side of my neck, but I thought it was muscular soreness from Saturday's yard work. Throughout the next couple of days, the pain got worse and a ball started to form and grow where the pain was. I went to the health center to get it checked out, and they said it was probably some throat infection or maybe mono. I asked the chief nurse to give me a worst case scenario, and she said that there was a very rare chance it could be Hodgkin's Lymphoma, a common type of cancer with a cure rate of over 90%.

They gave me antibiotics for a week, but nothing changed. The ball had stopped growing and the pain was not as bad after a few days, but that was simply my immune system's reaction to whatever that was. I went to see a doctor about two weeks after I first experienced that pain, and he examined the infection inside my throat. He performed a needle biopsy on me, which basically consisted of him sticking a needle inside my mouth, down to my throat where he pierced the chunky, painful mass in order to numb it with local anesthesia; he followed this up by going inside my mouth with some sort of steel, plucking device in order to take a piece of the mass on which he would later run tests. I went back to my dorm with my mouth half-numb, hopeful that everything would be fine.

Possibly, something is alive at one time, and dead at another time.

- From "Confrontations with the Reaper" by Fred Feldman (110)

I had just finished my last final exam in the morning before I went to the hospital to find out what I had. One of the school nurses decided to go with me in case I heard unpleasant news. When I got there, the doctor didn't waste any time. He told me I had cancer. I wasn't angry or sad or shocked or anything really. I'm not sure why, but I reacted to it with a completely stoic expression according to the nurse. Not only did I have cancer, but I had Diffuse Large B-Cell Lymphoma, which is a type of Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma, a variety of cancer that is far more aggressive and deadly than Hodgkin's Lymphoma, worse than the "worst case scenario" I previously talked about with the school nurse. The doctor told me I would have to get chemotherapy, radiotherapy, or some combination of the two, but he wasn't entirely sure since he didn't specialize in cancer. I appreciated the fact that he decided to not charge me anything for that appointment after telling me I had cancer—it's a policy of his. After having a very surreal conversation with my mother in which I told her I had cancer in a very matter-of-fact manner, we decided I would spend as long as it took receiving treatment until I was cured, which I was confident I would be.

*Let the flowing create
A new inner being
As the source in the mountains
Gives water in pulses,
These can be felt at
The heart of the current
And here it is only
One wandering step
Forth, to the sea.
Your freed hair floating
Out of your brain.*

-From "Inside the River" by James Dickey

Chemotherapy is, by far, the toughest thing I have ever experienced on a physical, emotional, and psychological level. I started treatment in early June, at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, which is not even remotely close to home. My oncologist, Dr. G, told me before I started treatment that I should be aware of the fact that the treatment might not work and I could die. I think he has to say that for legal reasons. Right before I started treatment, I learned how long and complicated this process was going to be. A lot of chemotherapies last six or more months, but mine was scheduled to only last a little over three months due to the fact that my cancer was very aggressive, which could only be combated with an aggressive form of chemotherapy. That basically meant that every cycle of chemotherapy would be separated by two weeks (three is the standard), giving my body less time to recuperate between cycles. It also meant that I would need to take about ten pills a day in order to help my body achieve some sort of equilibrium (and that's excluding the six or seven pills I had to take before each cycle). Nevertheless, I was ready to get rid of that cancer that had formed in my body for inexplicable reasons, so I went into the hospital for my first session of chemo, and endured six long hours of different chemicals searing into my veins through an IV which made me feel over-saturated. One of Dr. G's co-workers got cancer after dealing with cancer patients for seventeen years and she said that it's impossible to explain how chemotherapy feels because it is unlike any other feeling in the world. Besides, every person's cancer is different, and every person's body reacts to chemotherapy in a different manner. I've never been able to successfully describe how chemo feels but it's something along these lines: imagine stuffing yourself to the point where, not only your stomach, but your entire body cannot handle any more liquid or food

or anything. Then imagine poisoning your entire bloodstream with toxic chemicals: your body does not function normally because every organ in your body is dependent on your blood and all of it is corrupted, weakened, invaded, violated. Then add extreme exhaustion, nausea, headaches, stomachaches, and an undying sense of helplessness.

*As I danced with the dead
My free spirit was laughing and howling down at me
Below my undead body
Just danced the circle of dead*

*Until the time came to reunite us both
My spirit came back down to me
I didn't know if I was alive or dead
As the others all joined in with me*

-From Iron Maiden's "Dance of Death," written by Steve Harris.

A three-month cycle of chemotherapy takes quite a toll on your body. In fact, before my last cycle of chemo, in early September of that year, there were serious concerns about my body's health and whether or not it could endure another cycle without waiting a few more days. A little over halfway through my treatment, I got a CAT and a PET scan, and my cancer was in full remission, but my doctor said that it is very unorthodox to finish treatment halfway through since there were still probably traces of the disease inside of me. I was so weakened right before my last cycle that some doctors and my mother were questioning whether or not we should wait until my body recovered a little bit. My doctor and I were both unwilling to take this chance because waiting a few days might give the cancer a chance to resurface and we were all about overkill. My body was so abused by the treatment that my hemoglobin levels (hemoglobin are responsible for pumping oxygen into your blood) were at 52,000 and a healthy level is between 160,000 and 400,000; they don't even consider giving treatment to someone whose hemoglobin levels are under 50 thousand because it lowers the person's immune system and deprives their body of oxygen too much. Even though for the first half of treatment I could come in for six hours and then leave, the second half was in-patient treatment so I had to stay there for three days (Wednesday through Friday), and it was a lot rougher for me. During the last cycle, I felt like I was slowly withering away in that hospital bed. I had no energy to do anything except force myself to go to the bathroom often because of the high amount of liquid that was being poured into me from four different IVs: the chemo, with a saline solution

to water it down, and an anti-nausea medicine with the same solution to water it down. Nurses checked in on me every couple of hours but that was not what kept me from sleeping; it was the fact that I felt like absolute shit and couldn't fall asleep despite how weak I was. The dark and fluorescent environment of the hospital, mixed with my disturbed and hazy state of mind, played some pretty twisted mind games on me, and I saw random shapes and objects that weren't there. Along with these hallucinations, there was the fact that my body kept feeling like it was steadily disconnecting itself from my mind, or maybe the other way around. I needed a cure for my cure, or else I would surely perish there.

During chemo, you're more tired than you've ever been. It's like a cloud passing over the sun, and suddenly you're out. But you also find that you're stronger than you've ever been. You're clear. Your mortality is at optimal distance, not up so close that it obscures everything else, but close enough to give you depth perception. Previously, it has taken you weeks, months, or years to discover the meaning of an experience. Now it's instantaneous.

-Melissa Bank

There I was, once again, gasping for air. The first time, my direct source of oxygen was cut off. The second time, my blood had been deprived of its ability to breathe, to co-exist with life; it only knew death. As I lay there, awaiting a third lease on life, the on-call doctor ordered the nurse to get some blood for me stat. This was no easy task considering the fact that my blood type is O negative, and that means that I can only receive blood from a donor with the same type (which is not necessarily the case for every single blood type), but they found enough for me. They tested a pint of blood for possible diseases and it was healthy and ready to go at 4 AM. The blood transfusion took about an hour, and it was the most revitalizing feeling in the world. I felt like I just had a Red Bull with steroids, nutrients, and cocaine. Twenty-four hours later, I got another blood transfusion, and I felt amazing. The truth is I was actually still extremely weak and fragile (my hemoglobin was at 53,000 after both of those), but I truly received a breath of life thanks to whoever donated that blood. The next day, I left the hospital feeling like a little boy who had just destroyed a beast from a Norse epic. I was alive again, and three weeks later I had CAT/PET scans and found out that I was completely cancer free. It has been just over a year since I stepped away from the Reaper once again, and that entire summer makes me see life in a different light.

After my first checkup, my doctor very sarcastically asked me

whether I had a newfound appreciation for life. At first I thought I didn't, but whenever I see people complain or get really upset about the tiniest things, it angers me, but it also makes me realize how lucky I am. The fact that I'm still alive and healthy is great, but that's not why I'm lucky—I have experienced death. Some say death is ugly, unforgiving, relentless, cruel, unjust. Although these things may be true, it is also wise, inspiring, revealing, and peaceful on a level most will never understand.