Night

I came out to hear the crickets. They played the familiar, one-note melodies that, collectively, form their world-renowned symphonies. It was a repetitive sound, but not to the point of boring redundancy—rather, it was the lulling of the waves, the hiccups of laughter, the throbbing of a heart, a minute improvisation with every note. This gives it an interesting rhythm, a vibe that cannot be predicted, a subtle permutation no less random than a Rubik's cube scramble or a card shuffle. A new song was synthesized every night, every minute, every moment.

But what felt most unique to me was the sense of dimension the chirping had. The noises were four-dimensional, captured in the breadth of the landscape and the pattern of notes. To feel the sounds come from all around me, a grand arrangement of millions of seasoned musicians arranged on a platform all around me, yet all hidden to my eyes, was an overwhelming idea. I am in the central position of the conductor: listening, absorbing, synthesizing. What melodies would the crickets play that night? How many harmonies would I be able to make out?

On long nights doing schoolwork in the late spring or the early fall, these crickets always intrigue me. No matter how lonely my lamp's pale light is in the darkness of the night, the crickets are always outside, chirping without fail, showing to me that I am in the Big Apple of the insect world. The city never sleeps, and I could go on all night with them if need be—there's always an opening for the conductor at Nature's Philharmonic orchestra. But I haven't the time for such a job.

The chirping of the crickets are decidedly more welcoming than that of the daytime cicadas. Cicadas, the mysterious insects who spend 17 years (or 13 years, but usually a prime number—why that is, I have no clue) of their life in subterraneous tunnels and the rest above ground, give off a continuous buzz, a 120-decibel reverberation that is not that different from the sound of an old refrigerator or loud electrical lights. Unlike crickets and most other insects, they do not produce noise by rubbing body parts together—instead, they have a rapidly vibrating membrane not very different from a human voice box, or larynx; this allows them to create this loud—the most sonorous amongst insects and enough to potentially cause deafness in humans—and seemingly continuous sound.

I first noticed them when I was reading outside near my house—I mistook the noise for electricity and subconsciously tuned it out. It only occurred to me that something was awry when a plane passed overhead. Interestingly, this "electricity" also loudened to an unbearable hum that almost matched the roar of the plane above—it returned to its normal level when the plane had passed. I was later informed that these were cicadas; in my head, however, a screaming battle between wiring and airplane seemed the more interesting alternative.

Day and night, the cicadas and crickets play morning and night shifts as Nature's free musical gifts. The crickets I sought to hear were heard; my memory was refreshed, my mind soothed. But I got more than I bargained for.

I heard many things. Among them were two little "zing!" noises. It sounded something like flicking your fingers on your skin as if shooing away a stubborn insect; a quiet whoosh.

There was also a cry—desperation materialized in sound. I couldn't tell what animal was making it, but it gave quite a scare; it was brief, however, and the crickets reassured my conscience.

The last noise I heard was a sort of music, emanating from all around me. It was quiet enough to make me wonder if I was imagining it, my subconscious placing noise to fill the deafening silence in the gaps left by the crickets' chirping. But the music itself was too elaborate for me to have synthesized by myself, and it was unlike any other music I had ever heard—for some reason, it sounded extremely forlorn, as if the forest were crying out without hope for its lost siblings, a lost world, a lost Nature.

Even at this time of night, there is no lack of activity. It seems that whenever the crickets quiet down, a breeze picks up and leads the windchimes into a ringing twirl, or the quiet music of the forest grows ever louder. Nature loves to sing, and everybody loves to hear its music.

It is not very different during the daytime—the cicadas hum, but in their absence the birds pick up their song, the leaves their rustle, my heartbeat its rhythm. There is never a moment of silence, no need to

ever strain the ear to pick up a sound. There is always the presence of something alive, whether it be an insect city, a forest, a single blade of grass. Nature is constant and unshakable.

This is also true of the sky, the godly heavens. Looking up, I noticed for the first time the twinkling of the stars. Apparently this is caused by a variability in the air density and temperature through the atmosphere's layers. I had never noticed this before; I had believed the "twinkle, twinkle, little star" of the nursery rhyme was simply a fairy-tale effect absent in reality—but here it was, teasing me: "I told you so!" The sky looked down with a benevolent playfulness, as if some celestial body were winking at me or playing Peek-a-boo with the world.

The moon had a similar warming presence. Although it was shrouded in clouds like a sea of Dementors, the soft yellow glow emanating from its pale orange face lit up the entire landscape. Even in the absence of the sun, this light was enough to illuminate the scenery. In the thunderstorms that were common in summer nights, the great flashes of light gave the same landscape an electric brilliance even brighter than that of the sun. They were cold, sudden lights, but they provided an exhilarating alternative to the hot glare of the diurnal sun.

But this is a theme common in Nature. Everything wants to exist and be the most prominent member of society. This is Nature, a first-come, first-serve community. Wildlife and weather both understand: the louder and brighter it is, the better. Everything is piling on top of one another, scrambling to find its own space in the universe. It's worse than New York City parking, or Los Angeles traffic: if there's a space, it's gone.

This trait is exhibited even by the most fundamental building block of life: cells. They have a negative density-dependence mechanism, which means that they only grow if there is space. This is an important feature of growth and healing, when it is checked. In tumors, however, this function is often missing due to some genetic mishap, which leads to a hard lump due to an overgrowth of density-ignorant cells, which can sometimes grow large enough to block essential functions and cause harm: a cancer.

Man is the cancer of Nature right now. He is overpopulating, eating up resources, killing off other parts of Nature, even beginning to spread to other planets in search of resources quickly eaten up in a process called metastasis—a sign common to malignant, terminal cancers.

This pits Nature in a struggle against Man. It seems that, in the end, only one can survive. But for the thousands of years that the homo sapiens species has existed, despite the scientists' doomsday warnings of catalyzed global climate change or society's common depiction of a nuclear apocalypse, the world has seen worse. There have been five mass extinctions—known as the "Big Five"—throughout all of history that have caused the extinctions of as many as 75% of the world's species, and we have not caused another. Society has spotted the iceberg dead ahead, and scientists and politicians alike are already backpedaling hard enough to avoid the same fate as that of the Titanic. Man grows but Man learns—perhaps Nature is already healing?

Such is the question of survival. One cannot give up a competitive stance in its environment, nor can it bite the hand that is feeding it. It seems that Nature attempts to solve this by pairing opposites together. At the most fundamental particle of matter, the electron attracts the proton, and vice versa; it is an equal and opposite charge that keeps an atom stable. Removing one or another would greatly disturb the equilibrium and turn the atom into a highly reactive free radical. An electron has to be paired with another with an opposite half-spin, according to the Pauli-Exclusion Principle, or else it too will be imbalanced. Another example would be Newton's Third Law of Motion, that "for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction."

Nature, even at its most fundamental, demands balance in its overpopulated mania. If the universe were truly a large machine set off by God and left to run on its own, I wouldn't be too surprised—machines are made to compare, calculate, predict. Man would simply be a carefully-computed counterbalance to Nature, calculated and well-thought out in the grand scheme of things, and that the meaning of life would, hopefully, be much more than "42."