

Wag's Revue congratulates MICHAEL PALMER on winning the winter essay contest with his work, "Bodies, Water." In this essay, Mr. Palmer undertakes perhaps one of the most difficult subjects writers are often driven to grapple with: mourning. This essay may at first seem simple; do not be deceived. It is Mr. Palmer's restraint, his reliance upon image to slowly let grief exist rather than expressions of emotion that make this piece's climax shockingly powerful.

—Sandra Allen
Nonfiction Editor

BODIES, WATER

Michael Palmer

For the first week and a half afterwards I spent most of my time staggering around my apartment, lying down in the dry bathtub, and going outside only to visit the sealed-over cave or to attend a funeral. I hadn't informed my work or given any reason for my absence, so I was surprised when I went back for my last paycheck and found out I still had a job if I wanted it.

I was working the grave shift at a low-activity 7-11 and I did not want to go back there. But I had rent to pay and was out of gin and groceries, so I re-took the job. The shift was from 12-7 AM, and nothing really happened after beer sales stopped. Officially that time was one AM, but it was almost one now, and I knew better than to look out the glass windows to the empty pavement thinking I was finished for the night. Every shift someone ran in late trying to beat the deadline.

At 1:20 a guy pulled up in a Jeep Cherokee and left it running while he pushed through the front doors like this was an emergency room. He hauled two 24-packs of Keystone Light to the front and wiped his brow as he placed them on the counter.

"Sorry, I can't sell it after 1," I said.

"Come on man, there are like fifty girls at my house right now," he argued. I honestly didn't know if there was a red flag in the system if I made an alcohol sale after one, and though after working there a couple months I'd started selling it to people I liked in these situations, I didn't believe him about the fifty girls, and didn't like him for saying it. The top two buttons of his shirt were unbuttoned.

"Sorry, can't do it."

It looked for a second in his eyes like he might try to take the beer and run, but maybe he remembered how heavy the cases were and thought better of it. He tried to argue with me, but I

was already listening to the low *Dawn of the Dead* hum of the store and thinking and about how I would spend the next five and half hours.

After he left I walked into the back area where we stocked the drinks, and drank a stolen beer of my own. Then I walked behind the register and sat down, positioning myself in front of the cigarettes so it would look like I was organizing them to the surveillance camera. I was pretty sure the manager didn't look at the surveillance tape to check up on me, but I wanted to be in the position of doing something in case he fast-forwarded through it.



This was their route: Winding in Blake's mom's Jeep above Seven Peaks water park, parking in an unfinished residential area, exiting into the night and climbing the steep but familiar hill until it veered off into a mysterious cement oasis half-mile up the mountain. Some of that dirt was loose and they have to grab at the sagebrush and dry trees for balance. In my head and on the back of my nightly to-do list I traced those directions, pictured the dark water shining wherever the moon hit. I could see their bodies slowly submerging until their heads were cutting through the glassy water like dorsal fins.

I had been in that cave. Before I stepped inside I could see only a flicker of the water when I shined my flashlight in there. I took my shoes and shirt off and touched the water with my feet. My skin tightened and my veins started to change colors.

I plunged myself under, wrapping my hands around the well-worn rope, and vaulting my body through a fifteen-foot-long tunnel filled with water. The rope ended in a second, tiny cavern, just big enough for my head and shoulders to break the water's surface.

When I emerged in the cavern I was nervous and afraid that I might somehow lose my energy, and I stayed there long enough only to look around, breathe deep, then swim back, hoping that the fire of fear would shoot me back through to the other side. Rising, dripping onto the weeds and dirt, felt as good as about anything I've known.

The last time I went was just before sunrise. The sky was violet when we arrived. In the time it took to make the hike, dart into the cavern, and arise back on the other side, wide-eyed and anxious, half the mountain had been bathed in sun.



Blake had a lot of tattoos on his body. I liked the railroad spike tattoos on his shins the best. He also had two half sleeves, the one on his left arm the more colorful. I never paid a lot of attention to the individual parts of that tattoo, but as a whole I knew it looked like a waterfall flowing down onto a pink lotus flower near his elbow. Besides the water and the flower, all I could remember of Blake's sleeve was the color: red lines following the curves of the water, dark green blurring into black on the outside.

I liked the idea that someone might be walking around with his tattooed skin. Blake once told me that one of the things he liked best about tattoos was the way they map a person's life—for him, there was nothing sad about a straight edge tattoo on someone smoking a cigarette, or the name of a long irrelevant lover on someone's arm because of the way it was honest about the past. He liked all of that, and I loved the vision of someone walking down the street with a second-hand lotus flower on his arm.



At 3:30 two cowboy-hatted blondes wandered drunk into 7-11. They asked me what it was like to work there and asked if I saw some crazy shit. I told them that that night I had seen a sober middle aged-guy and a teenager having problems with “chicks.” They said that sounded boring and one of them showed me her “country dance” without my asking. I didn’t have a lot of response to that and they bought some beef jerky and energy drinks and left.

Even though 7-11 coffee starts to taste like seething hatred after three cups, it still had the intended effect of keeping me awake, shaky and irritable through my shift, so I poured another cup and walked around the store and waited for it to get lighter outside.



When they brought Blake’s mother Laura to the morgue to identify the body, they accidentally pulled out the wrong one first. They pulled out Scott, a person Laura had never met. When they pulled back the sheet, she was relieved. This was not Blake, Blake had not drowned. There had been a mistake. Et cetera. Quickly the morgue workers realized the mistake, covered Scott’s face and reeled out Blake for proper identification.

Laura said Blake’s body looked like it was still trying to breathe. She threw herself onto his body and tried to force CPR. It took five men to restrain her. When they did pull her off, her mouth was dripping blood like a vampire, her eyes just as red.



I had about half an hour to go, so I started tying up the trash bags and carrying them out to the dumpster where a group of magpies were gathered every morning as if they were expecting me. The outside traffic was switching on—I heard cars starting and doors closing. Street lights were still shining, but the sun was close.



That morning, I dreamt about the deserts in Snow Canyon. Blake and I had been there together once, though nothing important had happened while we were there.

I was lying on a large red rock with two overwhelming blues coalescing overhead—the blue color of desert heat sticking onto the blue sky like a contact lens. I couldn't feel the sweat and coarse sand on my skin, just the warm recognition of insignificance. Sometimes a lizard would protrude from underneath a rock. Mostly, though, the dreams were just colors stirred together.

It wasn't the deserts that ran through my mind every night as I fell asleep, though, it was Blake's imagined last thrust for air, his last thought.



Blake donated his eyes, too. They were coffee black and saw things with more intensity than I ever could. I wondered if any of that would carry over to the new owner. I wondered if I would recognize them if I saw them again.



After I woke up I spent the afternoon looking at a mediocre view until birds in the driveway started to chirp loudly. I made coffee and started thinking about Blake's lotus flower. Up until now I had never cared about a flower that didn't eat insects or grow on a cactus, but the lotus flower reminded me of Blake. First because of the tattoo; also because when he and his mom lived in Orem, they used to have a glass pink lotus flower in the front window that I used as a landmark before I became used to

his house, which was roughly the same shape and color as the neighboring houses on both sides.

I picked up the maroon *L* encyclopedia from 1975 and brought it into the dry bathtub with me. The encyclopedia said that lotus flowers grow in water—their roots are planted in the soil of a pond or river bottom, while the leaves float on top of the surface. The leaves are brightly colored. The brightness of the flower combined with its aquatic life seemed unlike any landscape I had ever known, and I was interested that where I would likely have a cactus or a cliff tattoo, Blake—every bit the Utahn I was minus a one year stint in Vegas and another in Denver—went for the lotus flower. I remembered reading a description of Sri Lanka as the “Lotus-eyed one” somewhere and wondered if the tattoo had something to do with Blake’s Hare Krishna days.

I got out of the bathtub and called Blake’s mom. I called every couple of days, supposedly to see how she was doing, but mostly because I wanted to talk to someone whose mourning ran all the way through her bloodstream, hair and bones. As the phone rang, I thought I would ask what she knew about the lotus flower, symbolically or otherwise, but thought better of it when I heard her slow voice on the phone.

“Hi Laura, it’s Michael.”

“Oh hi Michael,” she said.

I didn’t want to ask how she was, either, so I asked if there was anything I could do for her. I knew the unlikelihood of that but I wanted to see her and had nothing else to do. She said she would like it if I would come by and go through Blake’s old things before she donated what she didn’t want.

“Also,” she said, “there have been a lot of flies in the house lately.” Laura lived in Hobble Creek Canyon where insects were always a problem; every year she hired someone to apply a sticky chemical around the perimeter of the house and in all of the crevices to keep them out. But apparently the flies were

fighting through that chemical and dying on the other side all over the house. I told her I could come over right now and she said that would be nice.



I sped along I-15 to the second Springville exit and wound up the canyon to Laura's house. I was used to the drive; Blake had lived there off-and-on for the past couple years, and I had driven him home many times. I rolled down my window and breathed the canyon air.

The house was behind a golf course, distinguished from the other cabin houses by its red roof. There was nowhere to park except the driveway where Laura's car was, so I parked on a flat area of leaves and twigs that looked like it used to be a campground.

I knocked on the door and waited. When Blake and I came here late at night we had to sneak in through the garage to avoid waking Laura up. Usually we went into the basement to get something and then left again, so the house stayed dark and limited. I didn't see the whole house until they asked me to housesit and feed the cat and dog late last spring. Since it was a far drive, I would spend the night there, sleeping upstairs in a room looking out over the neighbor's dog pen below and then through the trees and the golf course in the distance. I made coffee in the morning, and listened to the rain fall on the red roof at night, making the sound of anxious fingernails tapping against a wooden desk.

The house was quiet; Laura had a fire going in the fireplace and some papers spread out on her table. Before she showed me Blake's room, she warned me again about the flies, reminded me I didn't have to deal with the problem, she could hire someone to do it. I said I wanted to. She opened the door. She hadn't done much to change the room—there were still dirty shirts on

the bed, books and records on the floor. The dead flies were all over the windowsill, falling onto Blake's pillow. They coated parts of the floor, sometimes two or three flies deep. I would vacuum them. Laura said thanks and said I was welcome to anything I wanted of Blake's. Then she walked into the kitchen.

I waded through the room, feeling ambivalent at looking through his things without his having a chance to arrange or explain them. Miniature model trains that he had sent to graffiti artists around the country to paint and return sat on shelves along the perimeter of his room. Other than that it was mostly dirty laundry and old notebooks on the bed and floor. There were shelves of books and boxes of CDs in the corners. The flies vacuumed pretty easy but I was stupefied by how many there were. There were dead bodies not only along the windowsill and the bed and the carpet but also in open drawers and in the closet.



When Laura saw his body for the last time in the crematorium, all of Blake's reusable parts had been removed. He looked like a collapsed bunker, a shell on a rolling steel table under clinical lighting. The workers paused there for a minute and let Laura get a last look. She stopped them when they tried to move the body into the furnace. That kept happening for a while, then she let everyone go.

They inserted the body, hit a red button and the body burned. Then they hit another button and the burning stopped. Then they hit a button and it burned again, to be sure.

When Laura told me this story I pictured a stack of organs lying next to Blake's body, alive.



I found Laura in the kitchen and she asked me if I was all right. I said yes without thinking about the question. Darwin the cat jumped on the table. I decided this was as good a time as any to ask if she knew, specifically, where pieces of Blake's body had gone.

Laura drank her coffee and said, "I'm not sure about that." Another sip. "This is what I have left of him." She walked to the cupboard and pulled out a plastic container that looked like it might have held sugar. She opened it up and I saw Blake's ashes inside. The correct term is cremains, I guess, but the inside of that sugar jar did look exactly like the ashes in a fire pit; bigger pieces of bone looked like the rocks that would turn white in the heat but not burn.

"How much can they reuse?"

"Well, I know they can't use tattooed skin," she said. Then she scooped some of Blake's ashes into a plastic Ziploc bag for me. She told me that Blake's tattoo artist said he could mix the ashes into tattoo ink and give her a tattoo if she wanted. She was going to get a railroad spike on her ankle next week.



Even so, I could still imagine someone walking around in the world, seeing through Blake's black eyes. In my mind, it was a woman: she was 5'7" with long black hair and wore a red Stanford sweatshirt even though she never went to Stanford and never would go there. She grew up in a small town and during the summer at night she drove to 7-11 at 2 AM to buy the Limited Time Only Slurpee. Sometimes she drove back home, sometimes on to the nearest lake. She knew the difference between jumping into a lake and a pool. I saw her look into the water, unconcerned with depth or temperature because at nighttime in the summer the whole world was like a large, cool lake. She kept her poise as she walked into the lake,

one foot at a time, careful, delicacy in each step. Then she dove outward, face first, with a swish, kicking her way down through the water. She fell away from the surface for a while, then came back to it and began again. Anyone with those eyes would know how good it is to dive underground and let the water swallow you. And how good it feels to come back.

I saw her dive into the water and return to the surface; dive under and return again. Then I walked back into Blake's room to finish vacuuming the flies.