

Summer Love/Death Song

The cicadas came out of the ground just as the world started heating up. They had not seen the sun in seventeen years and once the earth hit sixty-four degrees, they were ready to swarm, shed their shells, climb the trees, and scream for a mate.

They had a plan.

They were horny.

The people were too. They had been in various states of quarantine for a year and half, masked-up, slathered with hand sanitizers, unkempt and boozy in rowhomes and make-shift tents in the park. The vaccine had come out and businesses had reopened to full capacity just as the cicadas made their move.

The weather was changing.

The world was in flux.

It was on.

The cicadas' emergence and the end of quarantine supposedly had nothing to do with one another. It was supposed to be a coincidence.

It was all just the stuff of life.

Sex.

Death.

Herd immunity.

Brood X.

The cicadas' mating strategy was basically the same as the humans on their dating apps: They played a numbers game. Knowing that most of them would be eaten before they mated and that all of them would die shortly afterwards, they came out in screeching hordes.

Their lives were a gamble.

They were all just trying to get lucky.

Most people in the neighborhood were still cautious about wearing their masks - out of respect or self-consciousness, if no longer fear - so, like the cicadas, their eyes were their most prominent features. The eyes looked sleepy and bloodshot, or pent-up and nervous. They either looked like they were just waking up from a long nap or like they hadn't slept in ages.

Some eyes looked both.

Many thought it looked sexy. Anything was sexy when you had been cooped up for so long.

The humans had learned to bake bread and cultivate tiny gardens during the quarantine. They had been making hot sauce and taking up painting. People were trying new things. They started posting recipes for cicadas online as if the sad, dumb bugs didn't have enough predators already.

Everyone had predators, whether they knew it or not.

The cicadas had not involved themselves in new hobbies. They just did the same old thing that had always worked for them.

They were used to this.

The weather heated up overnight. There was no spring that year. Only summer and it was time for the world to fall in love again.

Not that people hadn't been in love during the quarantine. It wasn't outlawed or anything like that. Humans were meeting people online and shacking up with their exes out of loneliness. Illicit encounters. Desperate stuff in alleyways.

Relationships ran their course at rapid speed during confinement. Divorce was more popular than ever. People met potential lovers on the other side of the planet and made hollow, but sincere plans to meet when travel was less restricted. Teenagers attended prom via webcams.

All the orgies had gone underground and just like the cicadas, it was time to come up.

Some of the humans were expecting a riot.

The cicadas had promised themselves one.

Bandanas as face masks, hung around the neck, were still all the rage. Everyone looked like a cowboy. When they went indoors and had to cover their faces, they looked like train robbers.

Condoms hadn't become any more popular. We had a new virus to worry about and with all the focus on that, the world was getting a little reckless.

The police had stopped making arrests for vice and non-violent crimes like drugs or prostitution. Every corner in the city smelled like weed. We no longer prosecuted urination in public or graffiti or open containers. The most recent trash and recycling strike had just ended. Fireworks filled the sky each night. The homeless hung out around burning trash cans next to yuppies and college kids and crust punks and corner boys. Crowds formed around bluetooth speakers and socially distanced guitar lessons in the park.

The people had gone strange.

And now a storm of red-eyed bugs had come to join in the fun.

Heavy times.

Biblical almost.

Very loud.

The male cicadas used muscles near their gut called tymbals to scream at the females. The trees sounded angry. All of the bugs were blind and stupid and slow, but since they lived underground for 17 years they managed to have the longest lifespan of any insect. Their strategy to survive in the world was to hide from it most of their lives, sucking on sap, then throw one big party at the end.

They had beaten the system.

They were gaming on everyone.

The humans that survived the plague were kind of doing the same thing.

Both species also decorated the trees. They had that in common. The cicadas did it with their bodies and shells. Their babies rained from the branches like confetti. Humans, out of boredom, had been hanging ornaments, bits of nature and trash held together with wire and yarn. Lean-to's made of broken sticks. Dangling twig crosses and empty beer cans and baby doll heads.

It was nice.

Everyone, bugs and all, attempted to practice their own secret rituals.

At the center of the park was a dell, surrounded by a stone ledge that held up a ring of wooded hills full of screaming trees. The noise that came out of the cicadas' abdomens filled the dell from all sides. Cicada-song poured down on the dog walkers and day drinkers. It drowned out smartphone DJ's and drum circles. It rose and fell in waves.

Sometimes I lay on my back and shut my eyes. I breathed through my mask and listened. The collective scream spoke to me as one voice or millions of voices at once.

The voice or voices were hard to make out. It was the kind of music that required active listening.

The hair in my ears went stiff.

I listened closer.

"Find your mate," the voices said. "Get naked and die."

On the ground all around me were shells.

It's not that easy, I thought at first.

Then I thought, maybe it is...

All of it was true.

And sort of boring.

"Fuck me," the voices said.