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The Morning

Michael Burgman
Cedarville University

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About the Contributor (Optional)

Michael Burgman is a senior integrated language arts major. After graduation, Michael hopes to return to his home state of Pennsylvania to teach middle or high school English.

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The Morning

Michael Burgman

The syrup-covered oatmeal had long since ceased to warm my belly. The morning darkness relentlessly crept through my layers of clothing. I was cold. The cold held my eyelids open as I sat alone, unmoving, shaking, tense. The sun would soon rise and I would have other things to occupy my mind but now I waited.

The morning sun seemed to rise slower than the minute hand during a bad sermon. I strained my eyes, searching, mentally sculpting, making images out of shadows, tree combinations – a wolf, a murderer – anything to keep my blood pumping, to make my adrenaline flow. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, relaxed.

I only slept for a moment. I was awakened by the startling silence, the cool crisp breeze whispering noiselessly through the empty trees. I had missed the moment, the moment when the light overtakes the darkness, when the night gives way to the day. Its only a moment, only a second, missed in the shudder of a yawn. The sun was still not visible but the woods were. The murderer was nothing but a thick trunk crossed by a branch, the wolf, the shadow of an unseen valley, a small decline, roughly covered by colored leaves, a fur of many colors. I was now a hunter, no longer waiting, no longer helpless, no longer blinded. The sun had given my eyes the right to work. The freezing

Winchester in my lap was no longer a hapless passenger – it was a partner. I stood to survey my view, my metal tree stand complaining about the disturbance. I looked out over the leaf-covered landscape with a careful eye, searching, hoping, dreaming. I looked at my feet, covered in my dad's warmest set of boots, somehow stuffed with 800 grams of Thinsulate. Past my shoes and through the bars of my tree stand I saw the roots of the tree I was strapped to, ten feet down, another twelve feet up, me hanging in the balance, like a fulcrum that has failed but refuses to admit defeat. The wind picked up, my tree swayed, slowly, deliberately, squeaking its branches against its neighbors, breaking the deafening silence. I looked up. Nothing. I sat down, quietly, carefully, like an old man but with less shaking. I checked my gun: safety on and scope clear, strap adjusted and resting comfortably. The wind was cold; I closed my eyes. I told myself I was in Florida; I tried Arizona, Jamaica, no – I was still freezing. I lowered my chin to my chest, blocking the wind from going down my coat; I wished I had a scarf. I closed my eyes; I vowed to listen for the crunching of leaves, the declarative footsteps, the tell-tale snort.

I heard a shout, a strong voice, inaudible, urging, commanding, instructing. My eyes flew open, my ears twisted to take in the view. My body sat erect, like a war statue, cold and firm, silent and unmoving. I

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was awake, very much awake, awakened by a voice, a voice I had heard clearly, distinctly, silently. The woods were silent. There was no one to shout, no one to offer warning; I was alone.

A movement. Off to the left. Nothing. Again. Then I heard them, three deer making their way through the woods, quietly, cautiously, bearing themselves like princesses who had snuck out of the castle. I stood for a better look. They were far off, hidden by ninety yards, thick branches, and barren trees. Proudly I raised my gun to my shoulder. My scope affirmed what my ears and eyes had already told me, I had company. I lowered my gun, knowing they were too far away to shoot, silently begging, praying, hoping that they would keep coming this way. I watched, various body parts appeared through the screen of trees, first a tail, then a head, then a mid-section.

A voice, audible this time, off to the right, forty yards, I froze. The deer stopped, their tails shooting up like white flags of surrender, ears searching, senses screaming for answers. The deer had had enough; they took off in the direction they had come, soon nothing but small white flags, bouncing, riding the waves of their feet, noisily breaking through the silent woods. My attention re-focused on the voice, it was human; it was close. My ears told me it was a melody approaching down the slope toward my stand, natural vibrato added with each step. My eyes focused on a little woman dressed in a gray sweater and blue jeans, singing, picking her way through the woods, approaching the stonewall at the bottom of the hill. I watched as she

brushed the leaves off of the wall, disturbing the natural harmony of nature, all the while singing some unintelligible melody. She sat, made herself at home, like she was doing the most natural thing in the world, as if she was a part of the woods, a tree, a wall, a leaf. My brain was screaming for a better look, my eyes having trouble verifying such an out of place image, wanting a closer look, needing confirmation, insisting upon proof.

I began to raise the Winchester to my shoulder.

My brain screamed a rebuke: the thought hit me what I was about to do, the realization exploding out of an active volcano, covering, sweeping, shocking my senses. I lowered the gun to my side, shaking, not trusting myself, not trusting my feet, not trusting my mind. I had almost pointed a gun at a human being, not in anger, not in spite, not in war, but by reflex. My unthinking reaction had been to view a human being through the very cross hairs through which I had previously sighted the deer. I was inches from holding the life of another human being in the twitching muscles of my index finger. The sheer power of the moment overwhelmed me. I sat, staring, wondering. What had stopped me? Did my reflexes know that pointing a loaded gun at another human being was wrong? What had checked my initial reaction, my first urge, my natural instinct? I couldn't help but wonder what would stop me next time, or the time after that, or forty years down the road. Would my brain be able to check my reflexes in time? How in control was I? What makes me different from the wolves hiding in the shadows?