

The Cyborg Griffin: a Speculative Fiction Journal

Volume 2

Article 2

2012

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Recommended Citation

Catedral, Emily (2012) "Swim Lesson," *The Cyborg Griffin: a Speculative Fiction Journal*: Vol. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/cyborg_griffin/vol2/iss1/2

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Swim Lesson

Emily Catedral

I can recall seeing him before, a specter flitting at the edges of my recollections, but my first proper memory of Alan is when I was six. Six is a wonderful age to be living on the banks of the Mississippi.

“You should try squishing the mud between your toes, it's the best thing to do after it rains.”

I glanced up, and I remember thinking that he was awfully tall to be taking an interest in a squirt like me. Damp blond hair lay plastered to his forehead, nearly reaching his eyes, which matched the river shallows. I tilted my head at him and frowned, wiggling my toes. “Ma says not to go near the river if my pap isn't out.”

He laughed and looped his thumbs through his belt loops “You're not jumping in the river, you're just walking along the edge of this here creek.” He said, 'creek,' like the beginning of, 'cricket,' same as the older boys in town. Ma always shook her head when she heard them talk that way, I liked the ring of it when he said it.

“I guess that's all right then,” I said, walking over to him. The grass gave way under my feet, cool and damp as it faded to mud, and I smiled. “This ain't so bad.”

He had a laugh that cracked a bit in the middle, like the ground in a dry spell. “No, it ain't. But yer Ma's right. The river's right dangerous if you don't know how to swim proper.” He tilted his head at me with a slight frown and lilt of his eyebrows that looked part concerned and part curious. “Did yer pap ever learn ya?”

I shook my head. “Can't say he has,” I replied, “sounds interesting though.” I wasn't sure if my papa knew how to swim himself, truth be told. As I looked down, my black hair swung forward as if it wanted to touch the mud too. The mud squished up and between my toes. It felt like the reason I didn't wear shoes except for Sundays.

“I'll learn you one day!” he said, grinning wide as the crescent moon.

I looked back up at him. “Why not now?” I asked.

He wrinkled his nose, freckles scrunching close together. “Nah, yer not old enough yet, and I ain't saying that like grown ups do when they're keeping secrets. I'm just looking out for you.” He paused and then smiled again, “That's what friends do, ain't it?”

That seemed fair enough. I nodded. “Swear it?” I said, knowing that the only kind of friend worth having was one who kept his word, and the only way to get a boy to keep his word was to squint at him real serious like and try and put the fear of Jesus in him. (Least that's how Ma always seemed to try and do it with me, and I saw no reason to do different)

He nodded, putting his hand over his heart. “I swear...”

“Good,” I said, putting all the affirmation and trust of a six year old boy into the word, “What's your name anyhow?”

“I'm Alan,” he declared, jabbing his chest with his thumb and saying his own name like it was his job, the same way Papa swelled out and smiled when he said he was a carpenter, savoring the word like the last bite of Ma's apple pie.

That's when I decided I wanted to be Alan when I grew up. He said his name like it was some sort of profession, achievable and tangible. If it were so, then it was something I could look to be, same as how I wanted to be a carpenter when I grew up, just like my Pa.

"So where's your friend live, John?" Ma asked when I came back later and told her how I'd met Alan and we'd spent the afternoon walking in the mud by the edge of the creek behind our house, talking and laughing.

"He said he lived up in town, by the graveyard behind Saint Andrew's," I answered, stretching to set the plates on the table for supper.

"Huh," she said, fussing about the kitchen, "I wasn't aware there were any families with boys up near there. I'm glad you've made a friend though. I know there aren't many boys in town, and an older one ought to do you some good. How old did you say he was?"

"Dunno, I didn't ask, but he looked about 'leven or twelve."

"Sounds good," Ma said, "Just stay away from the river, it's not safe, and you know how your father feels about it."

I nodded and didn't tell her about the swim lesson. Alan wasn't going to teach me yet anyway, and I wasn't going to drown like Pa's brother had. The secrecy felt warm from my stomach to my toes. Something just for me and Alan, between friends.

Ma started sending me out with two sandwiches instead of one when I came in for lunch on Saturdays and summer days spent with Alan. He never ate them though.

"I'm not hungry," he always said with a half smile, same as whenever I'd invite him in for supper.

I didn't want Ma to think Alan didn't like her food, so I ate both sandwiches every time she sent me out with two. Maybe that's why I seemed to grow real fast, sprouting up the years passed in alternating blurs of peeling sunburns and the sleepy warmth of the schoolhouse. Afternoons and summers spent with Alan made my memories, and I'd never been happier. Having a best friend makes the time pass like that.

I suppose I was nine or ten when I finally noticed that Alan wasn't growing up with me.

"You're getting real tall, John," he had mused as we lay in the sun-bathed grass by the river, having long since grown tired of the ambling creek behind my house, "Yer almost big enough for me to teach you to swim."

"That sounds nice, Alan," I yawned as the summer warmth pulled the remaining drops of the Mississippi off my skin. "Splashing around in the shallows is getting kind of boring, and I wanna swim to Anderson's Rock before I'm too old for it to be fun."

Alan paused, long enough that I glanced over at him, shading my eyes. His hair lay, as it always seemed to, plastered against his forehead, just long enough to not quite reach his eyes. "Anderson's Rock," he said after a moment, "that there's a long swim, John. You sure you can make it?"

I blew a fleck of dark hair out of my face. "Of course I can't now, Alan," I snorted, "I can't swim proper at all yet, let alone a hundred yards out. You haven't taught me."

"Nope, but we'll get around to it," he promised, words settling down same as they did when I was six. He relaxed back into the grass with his hair that never seemed to dry, wearing the same white shirt he always did, and I must have been a right unobservant child, because until that moment, it had never occurred to me that he never got taller since the day

I'd met him. He'd comment on how much I'd sprouted up, and how he'd be able to take me swimming soon enough, but he never grew, though he was still taller than me by a good few inches.

I lay awake that night, staring up at the ceiling, looking for cracks through which to see the stars. I didn't find any, naturally: my Papa was a carpenter, and he didn't build no leaky roofs. The crickets outside chorused a summer song as I thought about Alan. Since we'd met, he'd been a stable presence in my life. Not just in how we'd play together all summer, and after school when it wasn't summer, skipping stones and fencing with sticks that became muskets as needed, but stable in his stability.

His white shirt that always seemed just dirty enough to be acceptable by a boy's standards, smudged across the left shoulder with a loose black thread hanging from the collar as though he'd just undone it. Same dusty knees on his pants, same hair that never grew and required a trim like Ma seemed to insist on every other week.

I scrunched my brow at the ceiling and wished there were holes in it. Ma said that people used to use the stars to guide them, and Mrs. Johnson taught us that the ancient Egyptians back in Cairo would build pyramids to watch the stars move. I can't tell you why, but I thought that if I could just see those stars, holding up the night sky like bright nails in God's ceiling, I would understand Alan.

We were picking shells on the sandy part of the bank two days later when I finally asked him. "So how long have you been twelve anyway? You never grow, and we've been friends an awful long time."

Alan was bent over, fingers combing through the sand, when I asked. He froze, and a drop of water rolled off a lock of his damp hair and dissolved into the sand.

"What're you talking 'bout, John?" he said after a pause that felt too long.

I frowned. Whether we were fishing or he was signaling me through the schoolhouse window behind Mrs. Johnson's back to skip out during lunch, Alan had always been straightforward with me.

"John?" he asked, a bit quieter this time, "What're you talking about? I'm just the same as you. A bit older, mayhaps, but a boy just the same."

I looked away, biting my lip. Alan sounding scared bothered me more than him lying to me. I sat down in the sand and wrapped my arms around my knees, pulling them up close to my chest. The sand felt rough on my bare feet, and I wiggled my toes, digging them an inch or so deeper. The Mississippi rustled and hummed, a nice deep blue with white trimmed waves, as a humid breeze ambled through, tugging at my hair and the sweat at the nape of my neck. Alan stood a long moment, his light skin that never burned or tanned, visible out of the corner of my eye as I fixed my gaze on Anderson's Rock.

"We're still friends, right?" Alan shifted his weight and set himself down next to me, not too close, but no farther than arm's reach. "Even if I ain't quite the same?"

"Well, yeah. Friends are friends." I turned my head and waited until he met my eyes proper. "You're my best friend in the whole blamed world, Alan. Even if you ain't quite normal, it doesn't have to mean a damned thing. We've routed the Mongols, fished off of Jamie Smith's property, panned for gold in California, fenced the three musketeers, dropped six stinkbugs in Betty Jameson's curly mane from the rafters at church, and gazed up at Cemetery Ridge, with the sun before us and our troops behind, guns held tight as we remake that charge that lost Gettysburg. You don't go to school, and you don't get older, but there ain't much more a boy could ask for in a friend, and you're it."

My lower lip quivered just a bit on that last breath, and I let go of my knees to ball my hands into fists around the sand as Alan blinked at me, blue eyes wide.

I remember thinking that, whatever his issue was, he'd best tell me so we could forget about it right quick. I didn't like feeling so self-conscious and invested. It's not every day that I'd give some speech on how much he meant to me or the like, and it didn't feel comfortable, having our friendship threatened by whatever words were sitting on the edge of his chapped lips.

My eyes had stayed fixed on his while I was talking, but they shied away from his gaze as the silence wore on, and I found myself gazing out at Anderson's Rock again.

Ma always said I couldn't sit still, though I wasn't half as bad as some of the other boys in class, but I think I can say with confidence that I'd never sat so still so long as I did that summer afternoon, with the sand digging into my pants and the river rising closer to our toes with the tide.

Finally, as I'd started to consider getting up and kicking him before I left, he started, "I'm—" but his voice cracked halfway through and he had to stop. He cleared his throat and mumbled, "Sorry, voice keeps breaking"

"S'okay," I said. His voice always did that if he didn't talk for a while. I turned to look at him, neck stiff. His eyes met mine, less afraid, but still hesitant and churning like the river.

I raised one eyebrow at him; he'd taught me how.

A slight smile flickered across the corners of his mouth for a moment, dimples flitting across his cheeks. "And you promise it don't change nothing, John?" he said, freckles crinkling slightly with the sun shining in our eyes.

"That ain't nothing I need to swear to, Alan."

He swallowed, head nodding slightly, and licked his lips. "Guess there's no real way around it then," he said, "I suppose you'd have figured it out eventually, but now seems as good a time as any to tell you that I'm dead."

We'd parted right after he'd confessed, and that night I stared at the ceiling until I needed to see the stars. If I'd been honest with myself, I would have admitted that I wanted to see Alan. Sneaking out of my window, bare feet creeping through the dew-strewn grass, I found both.

"Hey, Alan." I sat beside him and gazed out at the blurry stars reflecting off the water. We were silent for a few minutes until I spoke again.

"Not that it's gonna make a difference," I said, "but how'd you die?"

My eyes were fixed straight ahead, but I noticed him turn towards me out of the corner of my eye.

"And you don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to," I added after a moment.

He looked back out at the river and I leaned back on one arm to face him. Alan was silent for a minute, and I absently twisted the grass between my fingers. It was a warm night, and the fireflies were out in full force. One had just landed on my knee when Alan broke his silence.

"The river," he answered. A drop of water dripped out of his hair and rolled down his face. I sat and watched him, waiting for something more, but when he didn't offer anything else, I shoed the firefly away and stood up.

“Alright,” I said, “I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

He didn't say anything as I left, and I didn't ask him anything for the next two years. He started offering occasional bits and pieces of what it's like to be dead after a while anyway, but I was always sure never to push him for some bit of trivia. For the most part, however, our friendship continued uninterrupted.

He couldn't fly or do anything special like that, but he could turn himself invisible if he wanted to. I didn't figure it out until after a half dozen frustrating matches of hide and seek when he materialized behind me, unable to contain his laughter as he rolled on the ground. People who'd known him when he was alive couldn't see him no matter what he did, though. It made signaling me in class easy, as Mrs. Johnson didn't seem able to see him. The other kids would look on in puzzlement though, which just made me smile. Apparently she'd never been particularly observant, even when teaching Alan back when she was young and new to town.

Ma worried that I didn't have any friends but Alan, who she'd met a few times over the years, but never his 'family' that I made vague references to. It was strange in a small town, but when Alan smiled and said he and his family were private people, she didn't press the issue.

Pa was gone to Flory, a few miles down the river, most of the time; they were building a new Baptist Church and needed a few carpenters. He'd come home twice a month or so on the ferry, but was set to be gone on the day of my twelfth birthday. Ma wanted to have a nice celebration to make up for it, but when I said I just wanted to skip school and spend the day outside, she didn't try to push it, so that morning, too eager to bother with the door, I vaulted through my bedroom window.

“Hey, Alan!” I shouted the moment I caught sight of him, “You owe me a birthday present!”

He turned and seemed hesitant for a moment, then broke into a grin that made me imagine I'd mistook him.

“And what present is that, shortstuff?” he called back, still taller than me over the years, though by a smaller margin now.

As I slowed my jog to stop in front of him, I placed my hands on my hips and tilted my head, imitating how he'd talk sometimes. “My swim lesson, what else?”

He matched my smile, but his eyes wavered. “Ain't no other way I'd rather spend today.”

Alan barely seemed to grip my hand as he led me into deeper water. I halted when the water reached my waist and his hand slipped out of my fingers.

He looked back. “Everything okay, John?”

My tongue felt dry in my mouth; I nodded. “Yeah, Alan. Just... if I take one more step, it'll be the deepest I've ever gone into the river.”

I expected him to reach out and take my hand, reassure me and grin nonchalantly. Instead, his expression split with pain and he ran his hand through his hair, sending droplets flying into the water around him.

“Alan?” I stepped forward and seized his other hand. It always felt chill, but his touch rivaled snow when my fingers met his underwater. I resisted the urge to recoil and sought his gaze.

When he met my eyes, he looked old, way older than twelve, and his eyes were etched with indecision.

"John," his voice cracked, "I can't do this, I—"

"Jonathan Timothy Thomas!"

I jumped, nearly slipping on a mossy rock. My father stood on the shore, still in his work clothes and hat. He must have taken the ferry home early to be here for my birthday.

"Jonathan Thomas!" he thundered in the way only a father can, "You get yourself back to shore right now, boy!"

I stumbled back towards him, Alan's hand slipping from my grip.

"What the devil are you doing in that damned river?" he yelled as I moved closer, "I learned you better than that, John."

The sand scraped at my feet as they left the water, and I couldn't help but fear that it would be the last time I felt the river between my toes.

Pa seized my shoulder when I was close enough and whipped my torso around to face him as I protested, "Pa, no! Alan was gonna teach me to swim. I wasn't gonna drown!"

I twisted out of his grip and pointed at Alan, still standing waist deep in the river. His hair seemed wetter than usual, and he gazed up at me and my Pa with a particular sadness in his eyes that I'd never seen before.

Pa's hand descended back onto my shoulder with finality, holding me faster than before as he looked out, the Mississippi reflecting in his brown eyes, the same color as mine.

"What in blazes are you talking about, boy?" His voice was low when he spoke. "There ain't nobody out there and you're too old to be dreaming up friends for yourself, even if you can't make any of your own."

"No!" I yelled, "He's right there, Pa!"

His other palm crashed into the back of my head as his grip shifted to my upper arm and he started dragging me away.

"I raised you not to tell lies, Jonathan."

I lost sight of Alan, still standing waist deep in the water, as we crested the hill on the way to our house, but his sad eyes were all I could see in my mind as Pa snapped his belt against my ass. Alan's laughter was all I heard as Pa stood me up and yelled, again, the story of his poor drowned older brother, Tim, who'd died on the river when he was just nine.

Pa sent me to my room without dinner or supper and a heavily implied beating should he catch me in or near the Mississippi, but I was half out the window before the door was slammed.

My legs and ass smarted from the belt as I dug the balls of my feet into the grass, but I made it to the beach quick enough. Alan was still standing where I'd left him, though the tides had washed the waves down to his ankles.

"Alan?" I said, drawing closer at a walk. The river was quiet and my voice seemed to carry uneasily across the surface of the water. Droplets trailed down his cheeks, soaking in to the collar of his shirt, though the rest of him remained dry.

He looked up at the sound of my voice, blue eyes haunting the Mississippi. "I can't do it, John," he whispered.

"Can't do what, Alan?" I said. My feet splashed lightly in the low tide shallows as I stopped in front of him and reached for his shoulder.

"Don't touch me!" He jerked back, crashing through the previously calm water like shattering glass. "Don't touch me, John; I can't do it! I can't let it happen to you; I lied!"

I followed him deeper. "I don't care, Alan, remember? I don't care that you're dead and I don't care if you lied, it doesn't even matter."

"Don't call me that!" he screeched, ripping at his hair, "I can't stand it anymore."

"Why not?" I said, voice rising as I resisted the urge to knock him over and hope some sense came with it. "What's wrong, Ala-"

"I'm not Alan!"

I stopped, the water stilling about my hips as Alan, shoulder deep, sobbed and struck the water. "I'm not Alan, but I'm trapped being him, and the only way I can stop being him is if I drown you, John, and I don't want to, but I'm stuck fast, and I can't remember my old name, just all the ones before."

It's probably the stupidest thing in the world, but all I could do was say, "What?" As though that simple request for clarification would make any of what he'd said make more sense.

"I'm dead," he said, arms hugging his body against the sudden chill wind, "and the only way I can pass on is if I drown you, but I don't want to. It's weird, and I can't right explain it, but you're family to me, and I love you."

I waded forward and put a hand on his shoulder. "I love you too, Al-" I cut myself off. If he weren't Alan, he probably didn't want to be called as such. "I mean, you're like an older brother to me. I don't care about having any other friends but you and..." I trailed off and reconsidered what I was about to say. It was the sort of thing you couldn't take back.

"and," I continued after a long pause, "if the only way I can help you is by dying, that's alright by me."

"No, John, you don't understand," He wouldn't meet my eyes when he spoke. "it's not that simple, and I don't want you to- I want to see you grow up and be happy. Even if I can't do it with you, even if I'm stuck here by the river with my drippy hair forever."

"And I can't stand to grow up if you ain't coming with me," I said, letting go of his shoulder and moving past him into deeper water. "If you drown me then we'll pass on together."

He seized my shoulder and I winced; Pa had left a good-sized bruise there earlier. "I won't let you, John!"

I pulled away; the river was nearly up to my shoulders, current tugging at my shirt and feet. "You're my best friend, and even if we can't grow up together, we can cause all sorts of trouble up in heaven. Let me help, Alan."

"Do you mean that?" He was quicker in the water than I was, and moved in front to block me.

The midday sun beat down and reflected white off the water. I nodded at him. "I mean it."

His face still betrayed the urge to turn back to shore, but, in silence, he took my hand and led me deeper, then supported me until we were a good way out of the shallows, just a bit past the rock that marked the farthest I could throw a stone. I stayed calm and let him hold me above water. He didn't get tired, but I guess that's one benefit of not being alive and all.

He stopped and his eyes looked like ice as he furrowed his brow, fighting against a mixed swath of hunger and relief that kept trying to rise in a grin. I looked away as he let go of me and I tried treading instinctively the moment my head fell below the surface of the water. I didn't want to see that side of him; the Alan I was dying for was a smiling boy who concealed his sadness underneath a confident grin and steady hand.

I'd taken my last frenzied gasp and was sinking below the surface, hand grasping up towards the shifting sunlit shards of sky when he swam down to me, golden hair catching

the filtered light in a halo. He lowered my arm as he came down to my same level, and met my eyes with a soft smile. I stopped trying to swim and instead met his smile with a tired one of my own. My last breath bubbled towards a surface I knew I'd never see the other side of. His eyes were the last things I saw as exhaustion closed my eyes for the last time...

... only to open them gazing at myself, black hair fanned out around a last grateful smile. I seized my hands and yelled, "Alan!" into the water as my, no, his brown eyes closed. I let his hands slip out of mine and closed my eyes, curling into a ball as I wished desperately that my lungs needed air to survive. I feel a thousand lost memories I didn't live tug at my attention and as my arms and legs move in the habitual movements I know are swimming and I allow the most insistent scene consume me.

I'm standing on the shore, looking out over the Mississippi sunset and my rock, Anderson's Rock. I feel a smile stretch my face as I turn and walk back towards town. I'm not wearing shoes, but the dirt roads don't bother me as I return home just in time to set the table for supper.

A small golden-haired boy flits about, helping me even though I don't need it, and I smile at him. I register that he's my little brother in a distant way, same as the homely woman finishing cooking is my mother, even though I distantly sense that I'm not Alan Anderson.

Except that I am, and I eat a pleasant dinner with my family-that-isn't with a blur of pleasant conversation. My father is proud of me, though I'm not sure what I've done, what Alan did. The memory slips by faster until I'm lying in bed, sharing a room with my younger brother.

"Alan?" his voice cracks slightly in the darkness, and I register that he's nine and my voice started cracking when I didn't use it around then.

"What is it, Matthew?" I ask, and even in memory I distantly feel surprise that the voice belongs to me, it's Alan's voice.

"Today, Jackson beat me up and stole the blue marble that you gave to me."

His voice sounds small and afraid in the dark, and I feel my body tensing, though I keep my voice level. "Jackson O'Fallon? The ginger from the other side of town?"

His confirmation blurs in with a long night and the next day at a brand new schoolhouse that echoes of fresher paint than the one I remember most. I'm tall and fair, and I wink at the girls, cute and plain alike. The boys stand around me, hanging on my words, and I single one out in my attention today: a red-haired boy I affectionately call Jack as I slap him on the back and ask if he wants to come out to my rock with me in the afternoon once school let out.

He instantly agrees, and I can feel my own satisfaction, a slight tightness in my chest, the same way I can see envy on the other boys' faces. Same as I can see concealed delight at what I can tell he suspects will be a good beating that flits in Matthew's smile.

"Anderson's Rock," he says when we're standing on the beach and I undo the thread on the collar of my shirt, "Alan Anderson's Rock."

I grin, nodding in response, and tug at the black thread tangled in my fingers.

"A-Alan, I gotta tell you something."

"What is it, Jack?" I say, but I know the answer.

"I'm not really the best at swimmin', and I'm a bit nervous, though I'm real honored by your taking me out with you and all," Jackson stammers over a few words, and I feel a

small smile play at the corners of my mouth. "Jus' that I might need a little help if I get tired is all."

I nod and reassure him, and then we're swimming. It's odd, living through a memory of something you've never been able to do yourself. I'm strong, and move through the water quickly, just a few strokes ahead of Jackson, who moves sluggishly. Though I'm partially amazed at my own new-remembered ability, I feel myself sneering privately at Jackson's struggles. I've just reached the rock, my rock, when I hear him.

"Help! Alan, help me!"

I turn and sit on the rock. He's about twenty feet away and floundering. I feel myself smile. I knew he couldn't swim well.

"Alan!" he yells, head bobbing under the water as he loses his grasp on anything that could be considered 'swimming' and starts flailing.

His red-orange hair marks his return to the surface, and I shout, "Nobody beats up my little brother, Jackson, you get that?"

His eyes go wide before the river swallows them again. The only words he can manage when he resurfaces for the third time are, "Damn you," and then he's gone.

I sit back and watch, a contented grin on my face, when I hear it, my name. "Alan!" carries over the water, and I shift forward, looking back towards the shore. Matthew is there, a small figure a hundred yards away. He's shouting, and waves his arms at me. I stand and strain to hear more.

The river drowns his voice, and I almost can't hear him. I squint and I can tell he's crying. A sob reaches my ears, followed by two words, "I lied!" He says them again: "Alan, I lied!"

Instantly I turn to Jackson, who'd probably just won a bet with Matthew fair enough. The river is sweeping him away. I run to a better point on the rock, my rock, and dive in. I'm strong and soon I can almost reach him, hands grasping towards the sky in vain. I reach for them, and my fingers barely brush his as his eyes meet mine; they're green. I watch them close for the last time as I grasp his wrist and his grip goes slack.

I drown with him, as guilty in death as he'd been in life. I watch them bury me in the new cemetery behind St. Andrews and sit on my grave marker for a while. I watch Matthew grow old, older than me, without me, a sad and secretive boy with no friends of which to speak.

The visions faded back to memory as I pulled myself onto the rock, my rock now. I'd swam to it out of habit as I remembered, though it wasn't the first time I'd re-remembered these things. As my hair dripped in my eyes, the faces of every boy I'd killed flashed before me. All shades of color in their hair and eyes. The memories were well worn grooves in my mind. Alan drowned Jackson, and we both died, then I drowned Phillip, who became Alan, who drowned James, who became Alan, who drowned Marcus, who became Alan, who drowned Tim, who became Alan who drowned me.

It's only then that I realize I don't remember my own name. I never do when I'm new at being Alan again. Attending my own funeral, an invisible blond-headed boy in the back pew, the name I used to have slides over my hearing and mind like ice on a hot skillet and doesn't register as mine. I still can't remember it, even when I stand in my own home and watch my mother and father grow old and gray as they grieve their drowned son.

To move on, I must drown another innocent boy and sentence him to my own fate. I can remember the torment I've felt and feel, over and over again.

I'm standing off to one side, watching a dark haired six year old boy that I know and love, even though he's never met me. I don't want to do this. He looks at the creek with ill-concealed longing, but doesn't move towards it, instead kicking at a rock in the grass.

My feet move before I tell them to, and I recognize the memory as one I've seen from the other side. I don't want to kill him, and I won't for a half dozen years, but the pain of being someone I'm not is more than I can stand, and we both need a friend.