

Population Dynamics

By Mark Kestrel

Waiting for biology class to start
the overhead projector rumbles, filling
the room with its fanning. We
line the lab benches,
waiting for inspiration
How many will show up today?

Forty enrolled in the course last November
If fewer than twenty show up
for any one class
we have been promised
consequences.

We are 15 here.
The time is 8:27.

Two more join us in as many minutes
The clock's hands tick down in anguish
It's sometimes a boring class
But at least counting classmates
fills in the time.

It's a hard call whether to stay away
or to trust in solidarity;
enough students might come to save the crowd.

Enter the man of the day, grim Professor
He's just fine, really
Quite nice, in fact
But not all biologists carry scalpels into
a lab on population dynamics.

He shuts off the lights,
hiding the entrance of a final student
18 in number, we wait
in hushed anticipation
He tosses a green sheet of plastic
onto the overhead's platform.

We feel safe-- he has no attendance sheet
He won't notice our declining numbers
But he starts to count the heads, our poor noggins
cringing behind lab benches
"5, 6, 8," he says, scanning our ranks.

Another student straggles in
The sweat starts pouring
Prof's eyesight's poor-- if we can sneak to the back
pop up behind those two empty chairs, maybe he won't realize--
"16, 17, 18, . . ."

We scuttle round to the last of the benches
Our agonized faces shine up from the propane nozzles, wearing
"Hi Teacher!" grins

"19." He stops with finality.
He's missed us.
We're doomed.

Whatever devilishness he has planned for us
will be unleashed now.

He turns his back to us, hunching his shoulders
drinking his coffee, or whatever
Dr. Jeckle concoction
he stores in that styrofoam
His plastic cup cover falls to the floor
fluttering like some wretched moth blinded by
the overhead's glare.

"Only 19. I seem to recall more in this course."
He noticed.
Oh God.
What now?
"It seems to me that I said something to all of you.
About what would happen. About . . .
Consequences?"

The projector's light, ghostly green,
fills our eyes with red
after-images
Illuminates the hulking, plaid back of Professor
The blazer that never quite fit his bulging shoulders
and protruding belly.

There's a
muffled whimper from the back row. As he turns,
the synthetic light contorts his mouth
into a joker's grin of bio stats
Grim growth curves trace up and down his cheeks,
plotting our doom.

He speaks.
"Populations are very unstable things.
If the number of creatures in a population drop below a certain
level, the race cannot be sustained.
Extinction is the inevitable result."
In the faint light, he raises his hand
It is difficult to distinguish what he holds
but the metallic glint and slender shape seem
unmistakable.

"Hi Professor Albert, how's it going?"
We turn, drawn to Willard's voice
as he walks in hitting
the light switch.

A beat of a heart, one breath exhaled
Professor speaks again
"Why, hello, Willard."
The slightest pause, and he says
calmly,

"20."

The briefest smile crosses his features as he draws
his telescoping pointer to its maximum length;
its blade shines like a fencer's foil.
"Today we are doing the first lab on population growth and decay
If you open your books to page 21, you will find
the chapter heading 'Population Dynamics
in a Closed System.'"
And he shuts the door.