

Steady Noises
by Mercedes Joyce
Student Fiction First Place

I don't like steady noises. The air conditioning blows with a pattern of broken white noise, steadily altering exactly the same at exactly the same moment. Music repeats controlled by a steady beat. Over and over and over, building onto itself but never getting anywhere. Clocks steadily tick, incessantly reminding the world that it is one second closer to doomsday every second. The chewing of eating people, of eating horses, or cows, is a steady noise. Every noise, every combined piece of the world's discordant music, steadily moves on. I wish it would rush or dawdle or trip, but it always moves steadily on. Like a child absorbed in singing "The Ants Go Marching One by One", carrying my mind with it.

Breathing is the worst. Even my own. Every night my body harasses itself as I try to fall asleep. But I don't usually care— there are so many things to think about in the safe darkness of a sleepless night, and my thoughts never have to be steady. I was thinking about footsteps. Not steady calm footfalls carrying someone on a leisurely stroll. Wild, erratic footsteps skidding and tripping, trying to escape. Trying, futilely, to run. Dawdling and rushing and scuffing the dirt when they fail to make a coordinated effort at any given moment. And ending, in the end, because no two feet can run forever. Because escape is futile.

They told me so from the beginning. But I tried every day. I tried to escape on foot and failed . . . every day. And every time I failed, they laughed at me. Once I was too tired to hate them for it and too tired to resist when they dragged me back. Some nights I asked myself: where would you go? I never got far enough for it to matter. I never got to the trees. It is hard to run when you carry seventy pounds of metal and can never, never breathe enough. Almost. Always almost. It's

hard to swallow sometimes, too. Sometimes it feels like it's bleeding. But I think that was just me being hopeful. Because maybe if it bled, I would fall sooner.

On some nights I do not think about the seventy pounds and the blood that is not there. On some nights I realize there are steady sounds I don't always hear. The air conditioning is only when we don't need it the most. The clocks . . . there is only one clock. I don't know if it tells the time right, but it is the only way I have to tell time. So even when I doubt it the most, I pretend my doubts don't exist. I think we all do. Because it's comforting to know the time. Alone, surrounded by everything that was not, it was comforting to know something, even the minute hand that was only half a minute hand on a watch that hadn't been mine.

Some nights I don't think about anything. Some nights I am too tired to hear my breath, and then I only have to sleep though the pain around my ankles. And my wrists. But the weightless bands are not as bad, easily forgotten . . . I wonder how many bruises there are on my ankles. They will take them off when they break me. Or when I break down. If I fall asleep, I have dreams far better than reality. Usually. Sometimes I dream of reality. I never want to do it, but I do every time. Those are the dreams that do not leave me disappointed when I wake up. The others do. Always. When I swallow, and I realize again it was never really gone, I want to lose my hope in the darkness.

I wondered so many times if they would hurt me. I heard the others scream, but I never heard what happened. The ones they hurt never came back. Sometimes I wondered if they would die first. If I would be dragged to the ground to envy them their freedom that I had lost so long ago. Or maybe it was not even months. How fast did they teach me to kill? I could not have known. They took all the knowledge a human should be able to take for granted. Sometimes I wondered if the world had collapsed. Sometimes I pretended that someone knew I was alive. Someone in

that world. But I usually did not have the imagination to, or the conviction to convince myself that delusions were reality. That I would ever matter. Would I matter if I killed someone? I don't like to think about all the people in the world who can breathe.

I don't like steady noise. Driving monotony into everything they pervade. Recording lost opportunities, and purposelessness, and stress, and laughter. But sometimes I thank them. I need something to run from. They keep me running. Always. Always, until I stop. Until I break down. Maybe they will hurt me when I give up. Maybe all the steady sounds will die with my persistence. I have spent entire nights awake, listening to so many steady channels of breath and wondering when I will not be able to think anymore. When my mind will finally be carried away from me, under the ground and out of the rain. Leaving me in it, wet. I have spent entire nights awake knowing I will run. wondering if all the steady noises will die when I can't get up again. Wondering if they will continue without my breath.

Mercedes Joyce is an artist and writer from Marblehead, MA, who enjoys drawing, crafting, and writing both poetry and short stories. Mercedes is also currently working on writing a novel and spends free time running, cooking or baking.