

# UC Merced

## The Vernal Pool

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Peer reviewed|Undergraduate

**EMMA TKACHUK**  
**DEATH DEPRIVED**



**THE VERNAL POOL**

**ISSUE ONE, FALL 2014**

Summer is a cauldron: hot, dry, depressing. Huck Taft is a lonely man, and this year's summer does not look very promising for him; in fact, this day does not feel promising at all. Although his loneliness often forces him to fall into deep swings of depression, Huck is not a reclusive man. He wakes early in the morning when it is cool and reads yesterday's newspaper on his front porch. He waves when the insomniac pregnant women power walk past his home and through the street, and they wave back, most of them, most of the time. This morning is no different, although it feels unusually exciting and at the same time frightening. Huck folds the day-old newspaper hot-dog-style and crosses his lawn to stretch his legs. An unusual feeling overwhelms the friendly, naturally somber man. A sudden spasm stops Huck in his place. He freezes, alarmed and afraid, and grips his back before the world turns white. The lawn begins to spin, and the sky follows suit. Huck hears a thumping increasing in speed and his hands feel clammy. He lies on the perfectly maintained grass and turns his gaze towards his right hand. He moves his thumb from the small finger to the index finger – feeling the cool moisture. He doesn't remember what happens next.

Huck lives in an established neighborhood with doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs. Most of his neighbors are friendly, simple people (just like him), but others not so much. Doctor Gladden, a general surgeon and a busy man, is one of the friendly ones. He usually leaves to go to the hospital just in time to wave Huck goodbye before Huck goes inside for breakfast.

Today is no different. Doctor Gladden holds a briefcase in one hand and car keys in the other. He steps out of his house and, before turning towards Huck's home, inhales the fresh cool breeze, but that breeze is forgotten when Doctor Gladden dashes across his driveway towards the collapsed man. He dials 911 and tells the dispatcher that Huck probably has had a heart attack. The dispatcher says that an ambulance is on the way and begins to talk Doctor Gladden through the act of performing CPR, but the doctor's phone is already resting on the grass and his palms are on Huck's chest.

Doctor Gladden finally hears sirens in the distance and a sense of relief overwhelms him, not because he does not know what to do, or because he is in shock, but because Huck is most likely dead and stopping chest compressions even on a corpse does not seem like the right thing to do. The paramedics take over. And, long before the pregnant women have the chance to power walk back towards Huck's home, the street is cleared. Doctor Gladden is on his way to the hospital to do rounds and then start the three cases he has scheduled: one hernia, one gallbladder, one spectacularly diseased pancreas. The paramedics rush Huck to the emergency room. The hospital is only 10 minutes away, but Huck is not dead.

When Huck arrives to the emergency room his condition improves; he is conscious and speaking. Doctor Pagnol, a vascular surgeon, is on call for trauma. While the lead paramedic, Steve, briefs Doctor Pagnol, the doctor moves Huck's already-cut-shirt and exposes a rigid pulsating abdomen. This is all he needs to see. Doctor Pagnol obtains informed con-

sent from Huck and tells a nurse to notify Huck's family (but there is no family) and rushes Huck to OR #1. While operating room technicians prepare Huck's abdomen for a large incision, and the anesthesiologist for sedation, Doctor Pagnol is putting on a surgical mask, loops, and rubs his hands with the scrub brush oozing with orange antimicrobial soap. He turns the faucet off with his foot and reaches for the sterile towel. He pushes the operating room door with his back, a nurse dresses him in a sterile gown and surgical gloves, and Huck is ready for surgery.

When the operating room team hooks Huck to the monitors, Huck's heart makes a few irregular sounds and the waves on the screen turn into a long steady line. The nurse calls a code blue, and the anesthesiologist whispers, "I think he might die."

*Not on my shift.* Huck hears an unfamiliar voice. *Not on my shift.* The words echo in Huck's mind. They are never spoken, but he hears them very clearly.

The surgeon artfully lifts the scalpel from the sterile blue-clothed table and makes a large vertical incision in the center of Huck's abdomen. It is a rapid movement, and a rapid set of techniques follow.

While Huck sat reading his newspaper this morning, he could not have anticipated that he would be lying on a cold operating room table. Not on the same day, because he did not feel the pain. The largest artery in his body ruptured, an aneurysm undetected.

Doctor Pagnol clamps the distal and proximal ends of the aorta and begins to suture in a synthetic graft to repair the ruptured

vessel. He only has five minutes before Huck's brain is deprived of oxygen. Huck is surprisingly stable, his vital signs are normal. The surgeon is finishing the last two stitches and unclamps the aorta to evaluate the perfusion – the surgery is going well. Huck remains stable and Doctor Pagnol is ready to close the abdomen. Doctor Gladden enters the room.

“About done here?” he asks. “What a bloody mess! Was this a trauma case from last night?”

“No, this is the guy from this morning, paramedics thought that he had a heart attack – they found him collapsed on his lawn – but he ruptured his abdominal aorta,” Doctor Pagnol answers over the mask.

Doctor Gladden freezes in place. He stands still for one moment and then carefully steps closer to the patient. Astounded, he says, “He’s my neighbor. *I* found him on his lawn. *I* was the one who thought that he had a heart attack.”

“Well, he tolerated the procedure very well actually for his condition. It could have been much worse.” Doctor Pagnol closes the abdomen, steps away from the table, removes the bloody gown, and sits in front of a dictating computer. “It won’t be long,” he tells Doctor Gladden. “You can start your hernia soon.”

A nurse wheels Huck to a recovery room and monitors him periodically. The anesthesiologist visits Huck's room as well, and then the vascular surgeon enters. Huck is opening his eyes. He lifts his eyelids but they fall back down. He tries again – a little more success, wait, wait! – and he sees darkness. Huck makes a third attempt. He does not see a spinning sky

or spinning grass; the image is stationary. It's blurry. He hears a series of beeps; they are not his heart, not only his pulse. He also hears unusually rhythmic breathing, no, a pumping sound followed by a heavy exhale like a respirator. He hears footsteps, voices, ringing phone. He hears his name, faintly and loudly, "Mister Taft." His eyes collapse.

He opens his eyes again, slowly, forcefully. The strange place is peaceful now. The voices are quieter, and the noises are subtle. He still hears a rhythmic, computerized heart rate, but this time it is only one, only his own. His heart sounds different from when he last heard it. Huck feels a pause in his life and in this room. He did not die, *not on his shift*, someone fought for him. He doesn't know who found him, or who brought him to the hospital, or who took care of him. All he knows is that someone did not let him die. Someone fought. For the first time in a long while, Huck does not feel alone – he feels cared for even if those who care are strangers.

A soft knock on the door jolts Huck's attention. A nurse comes in. "How are you feeling, Mister Taft?" Huck manages to nod and offers the pretty young blonde a crooked smile. He wants to know what happened, but he does not have the strength to ask. "You collapsed at home, but you are all right now. Doctor Pagnol will come see you shortly."

The nurse checks his IV bag and asks if he is in any pain. He is not. Pain is the last thing he feels. He feels alive, and for the first time it is a good feeling, a feeling so good that no other word can describe it better. Huck closes his eyes for a moment and when he opens them a familiar man stands in

front of his bed, although he has not seen him before.

“Mister Taft, I am Doctor Pagnol. You collapsed at home this morning and the paramedics brought you to the hospital. You had an abdominal aortic aneurysm which ruptured. I was able to insert a synthetic graft to repair the vessel. Surgery went very well and without complications,” the doctor gently speaks.

Huck lifts his hand towards the doctor’s direction, his chest begins to tighten, and he feels a knot forming in the base of his throat. Huck fights it. “Thank you,” he says, “thank you.”

Huck does not have family, so he calls a taxi when he is finally discharged. He doesn’t mind the sudden shock of heat that hits his face when the pretty nurse wheels him to the front of the hospital where his taxi is waiting. He smiles. This year’s summer, although scorching hot, seems promising. His routine only changes slightly. He still reads the newspaper in front of his house, but it is not yesterday’s paper; it is today’s.