

Quantum Physics

by Beth Benedix

The black and white tabby loped gingerly across the gravel towards the base of the grain bin. From a birds-eye view, the bin is one of a handful dotting the sparse expanse of pastures and cornfields situated forty-three miles from the nearest city (Indianapolis), twelve from the nearest supermarket (Kroger). A glacier-cut landscape that turns instantly from barren to lush in the curve of a road or the transition from winter to spring, most of the houses sit next to barns, acres sprawling between cultivated plots of land, some with rusted cars or trailers tucked behind wire fences, chickens darting in and out of man-made boundaries that mean nothing to them.

“Don’t let him get under there, Abby,” Anthony said, squinting into the late November afternoon sun.

Anthony’s voice registered an anxious click, not-yet panic. His wife, Abby, lunged in slow motion, her right arm scooping dust as the cat disappeared into the opening, disproportionately agile in his weakened state. In her left hand, she held the phone to her ear as she described the play-by-play to the vet while Anthony ran inside the bin. Circumnavigating the elevated floor, he surveyed the slatted metal for vulnerable cracks to access the crawlspace beneath it.

“He’s hurt,” Abby snapped into the phone. “We think he was hit by a car. His jaw looks misaligned and there’s blood all over him. Shit! He just climbed under the bin. We can’t see him!”

Abby jammed the phone in her pocket, sliding onto her belly in front of the narrow opening. Her head ducking a strand of web, she peered as far into the dark as the cinder block framing the opening would allow.

“I can’t see him,” she told Anthony.

Jumping up, Abby ran to the barn for a flashlight, found one, returned to her belly.

“He’s there, Anthony, I see him. He’s crouched just over there. Stranger, it’s okay buddy. It’s okay. Come out. Come here, sweetie, it’s okay. We’re trying to help you.” A wisp of relief. Abby called to the cat, cajoling, then imploring.

Three minutes. Five minutes.

“Anthony, he’s going in farther. I can’t see him anymore. I think you’re going to have to pull up the floor.”

“Mm... yeah... on it.”

At the far corner of the bin, Anthony knelt on the grated metal, prying the edge of the first slab loose with a file, making his way slowly across the length of the floor as he hammered a lip into the metal to leverage the adjacent piece. A task he repeated until he removed three or four slabs, creating a hole wide enough to begin to see into the darkness.

“Stranger, come here buddy. I can hear you breathing. It sounds tough, buddy. We just want to get you out and help you feel better. Show me where you are.” Anthony spoke soothingly, as you would to a child on the ledge of a precipice, the danger of falling enhanced by the recognition that the wrong tone could bring on the fall.

To Abby, who continued to lay at the opening under the bin, now attempting to lure Stranger out with a packet of tuna, he said, maintaining the timbre and cadence of his voice so as not to alarm the cat, “we’re going to need to get him out quick. His breathing sounds labored.”

Abby jumped up again, this time to join Anthony inside the bin, both kneeling on the floor. Abby hammered, Anthony pried, slab after slab. Abby intermittently punctured the focused silence, pleading, “Hold on, sweetie, we’re going to get you out.” Then Anthony: “Buddy, we just need you to help us help you.”

Fifteen minutes. Twenty. Slab after slab.

Abby sobbed quietly while Anthony held her for a minute or two, breathing a promise into her hair: “It’s going to be okay. We’re going to get him out. It’s going to be okay.”

They resumed. Ten minutes. Fifteen. The floor ripped into a shambles, two-thirds of the slabs pried out.

“He’s here! I think we can get to him to pull him out,” Anthony called out. Reaching into the newly formed crevice, he picked the cat up under his front legs, supporting the rest of his limp weight as best he could. Abby grabbed the blanket she had brought with her into the bin, a sign of tempered optimism, swaddled Stranger, then cradled him in her arms. Kissed him on his dazed and mottled head.

They climbed out of the bin and into their car, Abby in the front seat still cradling Stranger, Anthony tearing down the driveway toward the vet’s office, where they learned he had been shot, a bullet exploding his brain.

They had to put him down.

Anthony is one of my favorite humans, a cross between my little “brother” and partner in all manner of creative crimes and philosophical contemplations. I met him years ago when he was working at Kroger, stocking produce. Anthony’s smile is the most genuine I’ve ever seen, disarming in its warmth, especially in a setting where people routinely pretend not to see one another as a survival tactic against getting drawn into a conversation when you have ten minutes or less to finish your shopping. It’s a classic small-town move, which my husband has dubbed “the cabbage,” shorthand to describe the act of intentionally focusing every scintilla of your attention on the thing in your direct line of vision so as to render anyone to whom you feel a connection or duty to acknowledge completely invisible. Consummate good neighbor/friend-in-need, Anthony resists the cabbage with every fiber of his being. He’ll take forty-five minutes out of his day to help someone—anyone. And he’ll do it without a second thought, more concerned that whoever it is he’s helping not feel like they’re putting him out than he is to have lost time. It’s not lost time to him.

An hour earlier, I’d texted him, as I do three or four times a week:

“Whatcha doing?” I typed, feeling out the shape of his day. A gifted singer-songwriter and filmmaker, Anthony subsidizes his passions through arduous days of construction work and house-painting. I was hoping to catch him on a passion-day, at home in his studio. I lucked out.

He wrote back right away: “Hey! Just working in the studio. What are you up to?”

“Not sure what to do with myself. Got bad lab results yesterday and won’t have a scan for another two weeks which is a little crazy-making. Diversion is key!”

“Hey man, head out if you’re not doing anything! I’ll be here. Abby too. Definitely come out and hang for a bit.”

I jumped at the invitation. A low-key hang. Maybe a jam session. Possibly a mid-day shot of scotch.

Minutes before I got there, Stranger, one of several outdoor cats loved by Anthony and Abby, came home in a fog of pain, pulled by muscle memory and a visceral need for comfort.

When Abby moved inside the grain bin with Anthony, I took her place guarding the narrow opening. On my belly, head scraping the dusty cinder block ceiling, I aimed the flashlight into the dark and waved the packet of tuna to entice Stranger. I lay there, self-conscious about intruding on this private drama and feeling guilty that the gut-wrenching scene was a welcome distraction to being stuck in my head. The “bad lab” I’d described earlier to Anthony had indicated that my CA 19-9 level had crept up twenty-seven points in less than three months. CA 19-9 is the standard monitoring test for pancreatic cancer. Three years earlier, I went to the ER at 3 a.m. with the most intense stomach pain I’d ever felt, wrapping around from front to back, squeezing the breath out of me. An hour and a half and a CT scan later, the ER doctor impassively delivered this gut punch: “Yeah, you have pancreatic cancer.” So much for bedside manner. Chemo and a Whipple procedure (“procedure” is a euphemism for the scorched earth version of what’s left of my internal organs) led to remission, a label that can only be tentative for a disease with a five year-survival rate of ten percent across all stages. My own post-surgery prognosis was grim: an eighty to ninety percent chance of recurrence. If it recurred, my doctor told me, it would be terminal.

To be honest, the diagnosis wasn’t a complete surprise. My dad died of it at forty-seven, and my aunt at seventy-five, courtesy of the BRCA gene. I’d had breast cancer four years earlier, which, also courtesy of the BRCA gene (specifically, my knowing that I had it), they’d caught early enough to do a double mastectomy, prescribe tamoxifen and call it a day. Knowing somehow what the results would be, I’d had a full-fledged panic

attack the day of the biopsy. But never once, from the time that my doctor called me crying with the news (I preferred the ER doctor's bedside manner, frankly) did the thought that I would die ever cross my mind. I mean, eventually, yes. But not from this.

The pancreatic cancer diagnosis was something different altogether.

Scared shitless, and sans husband (it was June 2020 and COVID rules prohibited his coming with us in the ambulance on our wee hours trip), I did my best to crack lame jokes and kibbitz with the EMT who accompanied me on the ride from the ER to Indiana University Hospital forty-five minutes away. Things went from bad to worse: I developed pancreatitis from the endoscopic biopsy they did to confirm the diagnosis, spent ten days in the hospital in a level of pain that made me nostalgic for both childbirth and the pain that had originally brought me to the ER, and had a feeding tube inserted (while conscious) into my stomach, a souvenir of my hospital stay I carried with me for three weeks once I went home. Then three months of chemo, six five-hour infusions of poison. Then the Whipple procedure, with a full hysterectomy and the removal of my cervix thrown in just for fun. Then months of recovery, re-training my digestive system to process foods that I'd practically lived on prior to the surgery (cauliflower... bad, bad idea. Salad? Forget about it). Then a year of an experimental drug—a form of daily oral chemo with many of the same side effects—that has shown promising results for stage 4 patients (not me... despite the astronomical level of CA-19-9 at the time of my diagnosis, the tumor had been contained in my pancreas, with four lymph nodes showing evidence of shed cells) my doctor thought was worth trying to see if it could slow or stop recurrence.

From the moment of the ER doctor's pronouncement, I have felt in my bones that this thing is going to get me in the end. Not every day, though. That's the bipolar nature of this whole adventure. There are many days when I feel completely fine, and I marvel at the thought that I'm still here. I'm not really supposed to be here; the cancer marker level at the time of diagnosis was double the level that generally indicates metastasis. I shouldn't have been eligible for the Whipple procedure with those kinds of numbers. But most days, even three years and change out, I process my life as borrowed time.

I'm a person who needs conceptual frameworks to make sense of the world. It's what led me to pursue comparative literature in college and as a career, teaching in that

fluid space where literature, philosophy, and religious studies collide. In the first months of the pancreatic cancer, it was Damocles' sword that grabbed me as a useful metaphor. The vivid mental image of a sword dangling by a thread just above me. The sense of impending doom. Later, when scans and labs became the designated measure of marking time, I found my go-to conceptual framework. My comfort-metaphor, as it were.

Schrödinger's Cat is a tool used in quantum physics to illustrate the absurdity of the Copenhagen interpretation—a theory that suggests that [“a quantum particle doesn't exist in one state or another, but in all of its possible states at once”](#)—when applied to real-life scenarios. The thought experiment goes like [this](#): Imagine there's a cat sealed in a box with a small amount of radioactive substance that controls a vial of poison. When the substance decays, it triggers a Geiger counter that causes the poison to be released, slowly killing the cat. From the outside looking in, there's an equal chance (fifty/fifty) that the cat is dead or alive. Until we open the box and find out for sure which one it is, from our perspective, he's *both* dead and alive.

Dumb, right? I mean, I'm no quantum physicist, but even I can tell you that all you need to do to refute the theory that you can be simultaneously dead and alive is ask the cat. If he doesn't answer you, he's dead. End of story.

As *metaphor*, though, particularly of the sort that captures the surreal space of waiting for lab and scan results to come back, it's pretty much perfect. Instead of exposing and debunking absurdity, in this context the thought experiment magnifies and validates it. Carrying this little tale around with me, its metaphorical weight extends beyond the waiting-for-results time to my basic sense that I am both dying and not dying. Imminently. The cancer either is or is not coming back. I identify with both the observer and the cat: From the observer's perspective, I see two equally viable paths, both of which I attempt to prepare for in the space of uncertainty concerning which way it will go. As the cat, I know in the end it has to go one way or the other. From the observer's perspective, there's a kind of morbid curiosity, almost cinematic, as I stand outside the box, wondering whether the cat inside is dead or alive. As the cat, I'm getting used to living with the idea that the poison slowly seeping into my pores is either fatal or merely debilitating.



So, I'm laying at the opening under the grain bin watching the thought experiment that has become a stand-in for the way I process my daily reality *literally* coming to life in front of me. The cat, Stranger, is *literally* in the box. Once Abby stops being able to see him and Anthony can no longer hear his labored breathing, he becomes—from our perspective— simultaneously dead and alive. It could go either way.

And I start to think about what it *means* that it could go either way, how that drives Anthony and Abby's concrete course of action. From my vantage point, here's what I see: they refuse to accept the possibility that Stranger is anything other than alive. They willfully reject the other option, and, so, willfully embrace hope. There are moments of despair, frustration, in this embrace. But it's the embrace that ultimately gives Anthony and Abby the figurative and physical strength to rip up the floor of that grain bin, painstaking piece by painstaking piece, the power they harness and channel towards Stranger's rescue.

They act as *if* there will be no other outcome. And, so, there's not. It's not exactly wishful thinking. It's conditional thinking: acting on the condition that such and such is true and making it true along the way.

Fleetingly, my thoughts turn towards Kafka's "Little Fable" and another metaphorical cat that's been following me around for years, longer than my diagnosis but whom I've re-befriended in earnest since:

"Alas," said the mouse, "the whole world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into."

"You only need to change your direction," said the cat, and ate it up.

Stranger had, strangely, become the mouse in this literalized scenario, with Abby and Anthony taking on the role of the (much more nurturing) cat, pleading with Stranger that he had options, that he wasn't doomed to die under the floor of that grain bin. He only needed to change direction, he only needed to let them help him. Which they did. For years and years, I've been puzzling through this parable, alone and with my students,

arguing sometimes that it was a sadistic trick on the cat's part—he was going to eat the mouse no matter what, but giving him a cruel glimpse of the possibility that it could have been otherwise—sometimes that the cat was the agent of the mouse's liberation—reminding him that he had the power to look at his situation differently.

Guarding the opening, in the unlikely but hoped-for event that Stranger would make his way out, it seemed to me the parable had morphed into a reprise of Schrödinger's Cat, with a moral I already knew: there's no either-or here, it's both-and. Stranger had options he could pursue in the limited space under the bin and given his waning strength. And, he was destined to die shortly after making it out.

I cringe at the narcissism potentially inherent in my tendency to look at the world through the lens of “signs,” that uncanny sense that the world splays out patterns, themes, images, happenstances that are meaningful guideposts to my own unique experience. And yet, it is my lens, as familiar to me as processing my experience through the Jewish concept of *bashert*, fate, specifically the fate associated with crossing paths with kindred spirits precisely when the crossing feels most forceful and resonant. Convergence is the term I prefer to use. It feels somehow less exploitive, somehow more reciprocal, more cognizant of the fact that this kindred with whom I've crossed paths has been and continues to be on their own path independent of me.

In this facing-my-mortality drenched context, the danger of narcissism feels all the more potent, but, still, I can't shake one more detail, another “sign,” as I watch this drama unfold. The cat's name. Stranger.

My English teacher assigned Camus' book to my class in tenth grade. It was meant to be a cautionary tale, I think, a “scared straight” lesson for those of us dabbling in apathy and/or nihilism. At least that's how she taught it, dictating to us how Meursault's selfishness, gluttony, atheism, lack of empathy (the list of sins went on and on) led to his crime, punishment and execution. It didn't seem that way to me, though. From the first line—“*Maman* died today. Or maybe it was yesterday, I can't be sure.”—*The Stranger* pulled me in, this outcast in pain, who felt—who *wanted to feel*—beauty and connection on a visceral level. The man I met in this book wasn't numb, or apathetic, or nihilistic. He was simply bewildered by the defenses and obstacles to feeling viscerally that he saw

being constructed all around him. I read the book crouching on the floor of my bedroom between my bed and my sister's, hiding as best as I could because I sensed it needed to be read in complete solitude. In that solitude, Camus' sparse words laying truth bare page by page, I felt a clarity, a way to name the sense of urgency that, apparently, I'd already been carrying around with me.

The clarity returned, dart-like, with every call to Stranger to hold on.

Anthony has a theory: Everything has an expiration date. When he says it, he's not talking about the ultimate expiration date (that would be less a theory than a statement of fact). What he means is that everything—projects, relationships, food, fortunate and unfortunate fashion decisions, art, music, the natural and unnatural world...*everything*—ends, at least to the degree that we know and experience these things. Knowing that essential temporariness is what gives the thing its power; it's a matter of listening closely, letting the thing tell us when it's done what it needs to do, when it's become what it needed to be. And not be sad about it. We've gone back and forth about his theory because I don't want to believe it's true, especially with regard to relationships. I started quizzing other friends about it, wanting to get their take. My friend, Dave, approached the theory through his knowledge of fine wine: to him, it's a matter of preserving the thing for as long as possible at the peak of its power, its beauty, its potential. Ultimately the wine will turn, yes, but there is so much to savor before it does.

Back in the space of metaphor, it seems impossible not to extend the theory to the ultimate expiration date. And it feels cliched and obvious and reductive, nothing more than a version of "carpe diem," or "gather ye rosebuds while ye may," or one of any number of overused catchphrases meant to stand in for how we're supposed to navigate this messy, irreducible mystery.

I shake off the metaphor, return to the dusty work of standing guard for Stranger, witnessing Anthony and Abby's exquisite grace in never once turning their despair and frustration against each other, their dedication to meeting Stranger's pain and fear with love. Their visceral hope and terror become tangible action.

And I no longer want to be distracted.

Anthony and Abby don't know who shot Stranger. They have an inkling that it could have been the neighbor whose land melds into theirs, mistaking the oversized cat for a predator. That evening, Anthony knocked on his neighbor's door and asked him directly, looking for the truth as opposed to confrontation. The neighbor denied it vehemently, protesting that he could never shoot a cat at point blank range. Hell, he has cats himself, he said. Anthony and Abby are willing to accept his protests, an accommodation to their preference to live in a world that favors hospitality over gratuitous violence. But it could have been anybody, really. As for the type of bullet that tore into Stranger, shattering his brain, there is only slightly more closure. I asked Anthony if he knew what kind it was, presuming that those sorts of details might lend clarity to the dark scene he, Abby and I stumbled into that day. He answered in the disembodied tone of myth or lore: "It's not been figured out. Some people say it could have been a high-powered pellet gun and others say a .22. Wish we knew. Might have helped narrow things down. It's a mystery buried with Stranger."



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