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bioStories

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bioStories is conceived in the belief that every life can prove instructive, inspiring, or compelling, that every life holds moments of grace. We believe stories harbor the essential architecture of biography and that slices of a life properly conveyed can help strangers peer briefly within its whole, hold that life momentarily in their eye, and quite possibly see the world anew through that lens.

We strive to publish the kinds of essays that stay with the reader like whispers in the dark. Our objective is to showcase the widest variety of writers, perspectives, and experiences as possible, always looking for excellence and subtlety and with an eye on those ideas and experiences that connect all of us as humans.

We publish new essays weekly and then gather them in digital editions like this one twice a year. We hope you enjoy this eclectic volume of outstanding essays.

Cover Art: “Secret Love for the Earth” 2024 by Anup Saswade
Digital painting

bioStories
sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

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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."

Beth Benedix is Professor Emerita of world literature, religious studies, and community engagement at DePauw University, and founder and director of The Castle, a nonprofit organization that partners with public schools in Putnam County, IN. A prolific writer, her third book, *Ghost Writer (A Story About Telling a Holocaust Story),* was named a finalist for the 2019 Next Generation Indie Awards and her most recent, *The Post-Pandemic Liberal Arts College: A Manifesto for Reinvention* (co-authored with Steve Volk), has contributed to a national conversation about higher ed. Most recently, she produced a documentary film, "North Putnam," directed by award-winning filmmaker, Joel Fendelman. When she's not hanging out with her husband and two sons, she's playing keyboards with her band, Black Market Vinyl.

The First Mosquito

by Mary Fairchild

Depression has been my lifelong familiar. It ate up a bit of my childhood, most of my young adult years, and a good part of my middle age. Around the turn of the twenty-first century, I found myself living in some semblance of wholeness and maturity, although my life remains to this day rather like squatting in a haunted house with a ghost who is not inimical, exactly, but is not particularly friendly and is surrounded by a droning cloud of hungry insects.

Many years ago, my husband and I took a road trip on his BMW motorcycle from our home in New York City to northern Ontario, ending up in the tiny town of Moosonee at the southernmost tip of James Bay, itself the southernmost reach of the vast and boundless Hudson Bay. Accessible only by rail, boat, or seaplane, Moosonee is south of the Arctic Circle by only a few degrees of latitude.

We stowed the bike in a lockup at the rail terminus and took the train and our camping gear north. There wasn't much to see in Moosonee, a microscopic hamlet in a limitless, unpeopled wilderness, nothing but permafrost and open water all the way to the horizon, and no way to leave because the train wasn't returning south until the next day. There were a few bars, a church, a Hudson's Bay Company store. And mosquitoes. Swarms, galaxies, nebulae of mosquitoes. They came at dusk in their billions, just as we were setting up camp, bandanas tied over our mouths so we wouldn't inhale any of the critters.

These were the days before DEET. We slathered ourselves with 6-12, an oily insect repellent that kept the mosquitoes at bay, but only just, and only for a little while. We could hear the whine of their tiny wings, a seething cloud of little "excruciators" a foot and a half from the skin. The 6-12 worked for an hour or so, and then they would begin to strike again. We could actually see them begin to perk up as the chemicals started to evaporate and lose their potency. The roiling cloud would become more agitated, then one doughty little torturer would brave the toxic vapors, zipping in for a quick nip. A few of his sidekicks would join him, then a few dozen, until we couldn't swat fast enough and

would have to reapply the greasy slick that was our only protection, inevitably squashing a few laggards into tiny, bloody smears on our skin. And they did not vanish with the dawn, those mosquitoes. Although their numbers ebbed at noonday, there were always a hardy few on watch, alert for the first call to muster, the first sign that the sunlight was waning. My husband and I went through an entire small bottle of toxic chemicals in a day and a half.

Depression keeps hold of me in much the same way. I might live free of despair for a few years, a decade even, but the smog of darkness and torment is always there, always fizzing around and above and below me, tugging at my attention, waiting for my vigilance to flag, waiting for the medications to wear off, waiting for the all-clear, when the first melancholy, like the first mosquito, can test the readiness of my soul to be feasted upon. The dark moments will start to drag into hours, days, and overnights, and all joy is lost to me as I founder once again in a darkling sea of sorrow.

I've been diagnosed with depression several times, and I'm here to tell you that I can remember, with a fair degree of exactitude, when I began to understand that the despair in which I was languishing might be permanent. It was in the eighth grade, in the commodious hallway outside the lunchroom at the Lawrence Road Junior High School. I was thirteen.

Depression is, as far as I can determine, idiopathic, which is to say, no one has been able to tell me its cause or origin. I didn't catch it from anyone, although the malign brain chemistry that gave it life may be hereditary. Back when there were walls in my home given over entirely to bookshelves, and I didn't rely on Dr. Google to address all my queries and complaints, I noted that there were, in *Roget's International Thesaurus*, nine two-column pages of synonyms for sadness. I derived some comfort from this; I was never alone in my misery, with all those synonyms for company. So many words meant so many people carrying the same burden.

Depression is substance abuse, panic, suicide. It is chronic hyperventilation. It is refusal to answer the phone or read the mail or open the door to visitors. It is both insomnia and narcolepsy.

Depression is auditory hallucination. It is the sound of children laughing with creepy good cheer in the darkness just outside my fifth-story window at three in the morning; it

is a grunting, a cursing, a screaming in my head; it is a stationary siren wailing through the night. It is finally taking the Christmas tree out of the house in April and letting the dog urinate indoors. It is getting into serious trouble with the Internal Revenue Service because the very idea of filing my tax return sends me to bed for weeks. It is the inability to change the cat box or pay a bill.

It is knowing that I'll never get what I deserve and that I do deserve exactly what I've got. It is not knowing whom to trust, and trusting, therefore, madly, desperately, dangerously. It is the simultaneous inability to tolerate human company and wild rage at having been abandoned.

And it goes on for years.

It sees no beauty without weeping, feels no sorrow without contempt. Its brutal lamentation appalls with grief that has no object and therefore no cure. Its cruel insight heaps scorn upon the illusion that people can and do recover from this.

Toward the end of the Second Millennium, I made the acquaintance of a very smart, very patient doctor, a Hungarian, and together we found the right mix of medications. Depression is biochemical. It is a warping, a failure, a crash-and-burn not of the soul, but of the neurotransmitters. Well, thank goodness for that, right? You can imagine my relief when I found that out. The introduction of Prozac into the readily available pharmacopeia in 1986 had already rendered a change in my outlook on life, but it needed some help to eradicate the particular depression, the personal affliction at loose in my body. It took a while to get the right balance of pharmaceuticals, but I stuck with him, my educated, eloquent, well-bred, well-read physician, and together we found the right mix of Prozac and other, more antiquated remedies.

I realized, one afternoon, that I was feeling better. Just that. I was feeling better. I felt normalcy nibbling around the edges of my chronic heartbreak. I hardly dared to say it—in the same way you don't want to call a no-hitter—but I felt…happy. I felt content.

That's the way recovery happens. It slips in when you're not watching, looks around, brushes the dust off its feet, settles down, and waits for you to notice.

I stayed on this mix of medications for years, monitoring closely all the while the state of my mind and my soul and my emotions. I tapered off all of the drugs toward the

middle of the aughts, taking some six months to titrate down to nothing. Nowadays, I strive for progress, not perfection. Do a little work, pray a little prayer, keep in touch with my community and my family as and when I can.

Sometimes I'll notice a weakening in the state of my spiritual health. Vigilance is vital. Waking or sleeping, laughing or weeping, I'm always, even at my most cheerful, alert for that first whisper of darkness, that first intruder. That first mosquito.

I asked my favorite Hungarian what people who had depression did before psychopharmaceuticals. They muddled through, he thought, leading their lives of quiet desperation. They could be suicides, martyrs, eccentrics, or saints, in ascending order, one supposes, of desirability.

My depression and its demons were both my enemies and my familiars; they were how I dealt with the world. My favorite physician's prescription, the selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors and their sidekicks, swept the little devils aside and gave me access to the true villain, the Dark Lord himself, and the strength to smite his ruin.

I am sometimes, even now, astonished to remember that I no longer live enfolded in a cloud of ravenous grief. I live a life of quiet contentment in a pretty spot out in the country. A good part of the property is wetland, where there is perforce an abundance of mosquitoes—just an ironic reminder that the darkness is still there, the first mosquito alert and at the ready. A gentle nudge deep in my heart, however, reminds me of the armamentarium I have at my disposal to slap the damned business down.

Mary Fairchild has spent a lifetime toiling in the vineyards and the canyons of the English language—writing, editing, reporting, reading, proofreading, designing, laying out, publishing, etc. She had a long career as a classical music radio announcer and now writes program notes for classical music concerts. She handled investor relations at a large international insurance broker, and she worked the police beat as a reporter at her local daily in New York's Hudson Valley and the equity research beat as an editor at Goldman, Sachs & Co.

The Days Went By

by Bryan Mammel

When I was young, I did stupid things.

I don't think I knew it at the time, maybe because I was young. Maybe because we all did stupid things.

Our group of friends tended to be outcasts, or at least we liked living at the fringes: skaters, musicians, artists, philosophers, and poets. College students, trying on the poses and postures of who we wanted to be. Except, we hadn't figured that out either.

The stoop was our hangout spot, ideal for its proximity to the essentials: cheap coffee, cheap food, and cheap beer. The small, unadorned strip mall at the corner of University and Moon boasted four floundering businesses and a mostly-paved parking lot. Tufts of grass grew through cracks in the concrete, drying out and dying in the hot Texas summers. We littered the steps in front of Zookas Burritos and Jo On the Go Coffee with bicycles and skateboards, slouching in an array of cutoff jean shorts, tattered pearl-snaps, tie dye, and Chacos.

Giving those steps a name made the place ours.

As stoop kids, we were mostly decent students, but prone to skip a lecture for a swim at the river's headwaters or a game of shuffleboard and cheap whiskey. Afterparties were more common than study groups. We wrote papers and made poetry, but spent more time at Showdown for $1 Lone Star happy hour. We rode bikes in large groups and sometimes slowed traffic or didn't stop at stop signs. We got busted for trying to "recycle" lumber from a construction site for a planned treehouse. We had backyard bb gun competitions and shot cans off each other's heads. We pierced ears with needles and dared each other into new tattoos and sang full-throated to our favorite punk band, Buzz n Bangs, before wandering off to afterparty campfires to play folk songs and old country tunes and look at the stars until morning started the game all over.

When we gathered at the stoop, we felt that we had carved out our own place in the universe. We felt special.

Sometimes this feeling veered towards self-righteousness, like we knew something the rest of the world didn't. Being young, we thought that individuality meant defying socially constructed categories. We weren't solidly punk, hipster, hippie, redneck or anything really, just a loose amalgamation of counterculture in an age of irony pretending we had the universe all figured out.

But John was different.

Short and gregarious with curly hair that fizzled over his ears and a shaggy beard to match, John moved through the stoop like a whimsical creature from another planet. John rarely wore shoes. He worked at Jo's, serving coffee and smiles throughout his shift. He gave hugs freely, like a candy-riddled toddler, in a red and white striped shirt and cutoffs. John was someone who liked people. Truly. Strangers, friends, and family were all equally susceptible to an almost uncomfortably genuine squeeze.

"Follow your heart." he'd say.

And he meant it. Genuinely. Somehow it didn't feel cliche or dismissive or ironic coming from John. Somehow it felt like what you should do: follow your heart.

"Do you think I should be a music major even though there's no money in music?"

"Follow your heart."

"What shoes look better with this outfit?"

"Follow your heart."

He loved the messiness of people's personal lives, loved hearing others' fears and worries, and loved being at the sticky, chaotic center of our human drama.

"Yeah, but what about how she cheated on me and then moved to another state?"

“Follow your heart.”

And so we would.

The first time I met John was the Tuesday before my wife left for San Francisco.

Weeks earlier, she had started sleeping with someone from the stoop who lived in the apartment complex behind ours. I remember chain-smoking on the back porch and staring up at those new apartments--Sanctuary Lofts-- and wondering how I had ended up here, so low and unholy. Wondering which window she was behind and wondering how love could twist two people into unrecognizable shapes.

The summer before that, at a crossroads in our marriage and searching for something that might save it, we bought an old yellow school bus and renovated it with student loan money, traveling with friends in the summers. Less joy and drugs than Kerouac, more Pepsi and Camel Lights.

The yellow bus didn’t offer salvation.

After she left, stoop kids helped me smash wedding gifts in the dry creek bed behind the apartment. They helped me shoot fireworks out of the back of the bus using a bungee cord slingshot. Sometimes you could find a couple of us dancing on top of the apartment building during a thunderstorm, waving flags and hurling dares at the lightning. It wasn’t therapy, but it was cheap.

So that Tuesday, I hated that she was leaving and hated the mess our life had become. I hated that we had upgraded to a two-bedroom apartment and hated that I now couldn’t afford it on my own. And so I hated that John was in our apartment.

He talked incessantly. He opened curtains and bubbled at the seams. His curly hair bounced joyously. He seemed to float through the rooms.

“This is nice!”

“I have a lot of art, is that okay?”

“Does it get good light?”

“What’d you say the rent was again?”

The day John moved in, he showed up with a broken foot. I hauled boxes and bed frames, and he bummed cigarettes and unpacked pottery. He’d point at paintings and

pictures with the fervor of a French auteur, and I'd hammer nails into walls and tilt left or right until things were level.

Slowly at first, but eventually with surprising totality, John made the apartment his own. He burned patchouli and put clay sculpted heads in the kitchen window. He hung an Italian PRIDE flag on the front porch. Strange art made by friends covered the walls. Plants grew from pots and clippings took root in glass jars. Music filled the leaden silence I'd come to call home.

The piano was the only thing that couldn't be erased; it was the same piano I'd learned to play on at the age of three. But John remade that too. He hosted bean nights, where musicians would bring instruments and a song in return for a dinner of beans and rice. I'd play the piano for hours for the first time since abandoning the church where I had gotten my musical start and for the first time with people who played for no other purpose than to get lost in the music itself.

> "The days went by like paper in the wind.
> Everything changed. Then changed again."[1]

We launched a block party, invited bands, printed posters, got our hands on a PA. The bus served as a stage backdrop and as a green room. The parking lot filled with stoop kids, curious passersby, and those who had been lured by the promise of free beer.

After the party, amid the empty cans and broken plastic cups, John and I sat in lawn chairs and watched frat boys atop the neighboring chapter house conduct a shirtless pushup contest.

At least we weren't them, we thought.

The night he died, I went to bed early.

College was closing behind me. The evening was one of many in the dregs of summer. One of those Texas nights where everything, cicada shells and withered grass, is stuck on its axis. Freedom had grown dull, so I'd left the bar. I was ready to move on to

[1] Lyrics from "To Find a Friend" by Tom Petty from Wallflower 1994

the next phase of my life: a bigger city, a career, chasing music dreams, the spotlight and the stage.

I remember waking up to the sound of a friend's moped. To voices heedless and eager laughing through the yard as he and John strolled into the house, easy as daylight.

I remember waking up again in the pitch black as the screen door screamed shut for a second time. I remember looking out the window as tail lights took John back out into the night.

The news report was terse, concise, everything that a news report should be: *Police in San Marcos say 26-year-old John Patrick Fox was pronounced dead after falling from campus tower.*

But the news came later. Memory is slow, dawdling. News stories force the mind to piece memory back together after all the king's men have left and written their reports. Memory resists and remembers according to its own cadence.

The morning of casual check-ins: "Anybody catch John this morning?"

"Did you guys see him at the stoop?"

The blasé lunchtime responses: "He's probably at the river?"

"Maybe he ended up in Austin?"

"He probably isn't even awake yet."

"Y'all know how John is. He'll turn up."

By afternoon, memory found me in another city at my girlfriend's apartment, already trying to move on, to grow up, to forget, to let John wander back to the stoop like he always did.

Memory found me checking my messages, seeing the missed calls, the unread messages.

Knowing.

Driving back to San Marcos.

Is it dusk now?

Dark?

Or can I simply not see?

What door am I walking through?

Who’s arms are holding me up?

Where is my friend?

Later, we tied red ribbons to our bikes and rode through the streets to the river, like each of us had done so often before. We stepped down into ancient waters, undeserving, trespassing.

And when we came up again, we were no longer the same.

Bryan Mammel teaches high school English and Journalism in central Texas. He is a father of two, a birder, a nature enthusiast, a hiker, and a hooper. Before teaching, Bryan traveled the country as a touring musician, playing keyboards and synthesizers for a variety of studio projects. Reading and writing have always been his anchor.

Still Running

by Mario Moussa

Aunt Net was waiting for Uncle Curty when he came home from the Dunes Hotel, where he was a pit boss. I watched from the living room sofa as Uncle Curty trudged over to his recliner, took off his thin tie and let it drop to the floor, did the same with the dark suit that barely accommodated his enormous belly, wrapped himself in a white terrycloth robe, slipped his feet into white velour house shoes, and stretched out in the chair. He sat for a moment, then yelled, “Bring me one!”

“Okay, Curty,” Aunt Net answered from the kitchen in a voice that made my back ripple with dread. She emerged from the doorway, with a beer in her hand, like a painted bird from a cuckoo clock. She shuffled to his chair and back until late in the evening, Uncle Curty taking hourly trips to the bathroom as he worked through an entire case of twenty-four cans.

I witnessed it all as the tension between them began to feel like electricity in the air. I sensed that Aunt Net would punish me for it. Why? For starters: because I was there and she could. But there were deeper reasons—reasons intertwined with my family’s history. I’d overheard conversations between my parents and was figuring things out. Aunt Net’s first husband had ditched her for a life on the road as a big band singer. Her younger sister was beautiful and Aunt Net wasn’t. My father had a big corporate job and Uncle Curty didn’t. For all these reasons, she was angry and needed a target for her anger. Anger ran in the family, too, growing from one year to the next like money in the stock market. Nobody ever seemed to feel they got what they deserved, no matter how much they got. The value of our collective holdings in resentment had become staggering.

This was decades ago. After a flight from our midwestern home, my parents had dropped me off at Uncle Curty and Aunt Net’s Las Vegas condo, then drove to LA in a fancy rental sedan to party for three days at a liquor industry convention. I remember exactly when it was—the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper* album had hit the stores in the morning. Like every grade school kid I knew, I idolized Lennon and McCartney, and in my imagination I wore a multi-colored psychedelic uniform. But on that day, when I stepped

out our front door, I was dressed in the standard-issue Middle America outfit my parents had chosen for me to wear on the plane: white shirt, khakis, blue blazer. I felt like an oversized Ken doll. When I skulked into the condo, Aunt Net looked at me and smirked.

In the evenings, I sat with Uncle Curty while he drank. Fingers wrapped around a beer can, stretched out in his recliner, he said little. When he did utter a word, he mumbled. We watched baseball on TV. I hated baseball—still do. Perched on the sofa, I twisted my head at an uncomfortable angle and sat immobile from the first pitch to the final out, doing all I could to avoid Aunt Net's attention.

The morning after my arrival, over breakfast with my aunt, I looked up from the newspaper. "According to this story, the Viet Nam war is escalating," I said.

"The little professor speaks!" she said, pursing her lips and taking a sip of tar-black coffee from a china cup. Aunt Net was generally nasty to me, but I knew this comment was about Eddie. Eddie was her grown son, and I was never going to be like him. He had stopped by the condo the day before in the afternoon. Hair slicked back, talking out of the side of his mouth. Decked out in a leisure suit. A high-IQ mobster, he worked as a bookie. Aunt Net stood in the entrance hall and beamed when he walked in. I had different aspirations from Eddie. Aunt Net hated me for it.

After breakfast, I turned on the TV and discovered "This Morning" with Dick Cavett. Cavett had an appealing intellectual style. Legs crossed, smooth voice. But the highlight of my day was the news about the anti-war protests. Long-haired college students marched across campuses, clenched fists held high. The spectacle spoke to an unfathomable feeling—it's still with me—of outrage.

Meanwhile, Aunt Net paraded around the condo wearing an industrial-strength bra and high-waisted panties. She seemed to be preparing to leave for an event that would never occur. At lunch time, she stopped in front of the TV. Images of protesters flickered on the screen. "Oh, look at those *fairies*!" she said. As she strutted off, I pictured myself fleeing across the desert, hair flying, to meet imaginary friends at a California love-in.

A few hours later, spread out in the recliner again, Uncle Curty had finished his first beer of the night. A baseball game moved into the third inning. I sat motionless, watching as he brought a can to his lips. He swallowed and barked, "Another!"

“Okay, Curty.” Aunt Net stepped into the living room. As I followed her with my eyes, my chest was tight and my breath was shallow. She glanced over at me, scowling, menacing. But I realized that when Uncle Curty was around, Aunt Net was powerless. I felt elated about it.

The next morning, when Uncle Curty was at work, Aunt Net appeared in the kitchen fully dressed in a clingy orange sweater and skin-tight blue slacks. “It’s time to leave for LA!” she croaked, hands flapping in a frenzy.

I got in the back of her big-ass white Cadillac and we took off across the desert. Dean Martin crooned on the radio about everybody loving somebody.

Two hours into our trip, the radio grew staticky. Aunt Net changed the station. The Beatles’ “A Day in the Life”—ominous, dissonant—came on the radio. “What is this *crap*?” Aunt Net hissed. With quick twist of her hand, she turned off the music.

After we had driven in silence for a few minutes, I said, “Can we stop, Aunt Net? I really have to go.”

“Piss out the window!”

The desert scrub hurtled past.

“How?” I said.

“Piss out the window!”

I rolled down the window with the hand crank. The air hit my face in repeated slaps. I tried to picture this working. She was powerless around Uncle Curty, but now she was in control. The moment of my punishment had arrived. The wind blasted into the back, thumping like a two-by-four whacking a barrel.

“Are you going to go or not?” she yelled above the din.

I had to go. I propped myself on my knees and unfastened my pants. The stream washed back into my face. I wiped my face with my arm, closed the window, and zipped up.

“Done?” she said.

“Done,” I said, feeling the pain of humiliation. I saw her eyes in the rearview mirror. Then I looked out my window and there I was, running alongside the car, on my way to the imaginary love-in.

♦

Many years later, I'm sitting alone in my kitchen drinking coffee. I just looked at my phone—the date, the news, my light schedule—and realized I'm the same age Aunt Net was in 1967. Even though she's been dead for three decades now, there's part of me still in that car. But I'm still running, too, striving for escape. Despite myself, I haven't forgiven her.

I hadn't thought about her for a while until a recent dinner party, when a friend asked if anybody had a meaningful relationship with an aunt or uncle. I told the story about hurtling across the Mojave Desert, Aunt Net at the wheel. Everybody laughed, including my wife, who hadn't heard all the details. That was six months ago, after the last election. Dozens of news cycles have come and gone and I keep thinking about Aunt Net. But I'm not laughing at the dark turmoil on the streets—then or now—and in my aunt's darker heart, or at the pain I can still feel, even today, when I think of her. By the tangled logic that governed my family, her anger—whatever its causes, the obvious reasons and the mysterious histories and humiliations that define a life—justified my punishment. I can still feel its sting.

Mario Moussa is a writer living in Philadelphia. His stories have appeared in *Write City, Flash Fiction Magazine, Loud Coffee Press*, and *Litbreak*.

Weaving Lessons

by Lory Widmer Hess

I sit next to Luca on the weaving bench, watching as he throws the shuttle, beats, and changes his feet on the treadles. He looks up at me and smiles, patting me on the shoulder. Back to work, then, with a low grunting sound, a sign of contentment. I smile, too, and walk away. All is well in order, and he doesn't need my help.

It wasn't always like this. When I first met Luca, who lives at the residential home for adults with developmental disabilities where I work, there was no smiling, no friendly pats. As I sat with him on the bench, I was more likely to receive a scowl, even a shove. He would go through the weaving motions for a while, then look out the window, or page through a book of pictures I kept nearby for these moments. He might even stick the shuttle in his nose, a move I had to gently discourage, trying to guide him back to the loom.

Someone had taught him the basics, and he could do each step in the process perfectly, but he lost interest easily. His attention slipped, and he'd tangle the thread or do things in the wrong order. My task was to accompany him, watching his every move, encouraging him to keep going when he stopped, reminding him of the next step if he seemed lost. It was tedious, repetitive work that yet required constant alertness, a strain to keep up for over an hour.

I was also nervous and unsure in my relationship with Luca, whom I didn't know well. His scowls and shoves could easily escalate, and he might refuse to do anything at all or decide to grab any papers in sight and scribble on them or rip them up instead. I was anxious about how to keep him on task without making him feel pushed, which inevitably resulted in him pushing back. I started to dread my time in the weavery each day.

How could he enjoy working with me, though, if he sensed that I didn't enjoy working with him? What if my first priority was to make sure he knew I liked him and appreciated what he did? I made sure to greet him cheerfully, to smile, to praise good work, and to treat mistakes with humor instead of dismay. I kept some other task on hand for the times when Luca was taking a break—something simple that would satisfy my impatience,

without being so absorbing that I failed to notice when he was ready.

The smiles and friendly pats started to come. Luca was more content to sit at the loom, and even largely stopped making mistakes. Soon, I didn't have to sit with him anymore, but as I walked around the room, I could feel how the web of connection between us remained. This web is destroyed by impatience, fear, and criticism, but made strong by respect, appreciation, and joy. I was so grateful to Luca for teaching me how to weave this fabric.

Each day in our weavery I am reminded of the threads that bind human beings together and that we can craft into a thing of harmony and beauty or allow to tangle into an inextricable mess. Working with Meret taught me another aspect of this art. In contrast to Luca's silence, she talked constantly. As soon as I made a move toward her loom, she wanted to know if I was going to weave with her, her words tumbling over one another as she repeated them again and again. Calmly, I said that I had other things to do first, and she had her felting to work on. She returned to that task, her excitement still palpable.

Meret's bubbling enthusiasm was wonderful, but it could easily morph into agitation and anger if she felt frustrated. Equally, it could spiral out of control if she was given unbridled license to do whatever she wanted. Her energy had to be tempered, as did Luca's lethargy. The balancing element was a cheerful, positive mood that told her it was okay to wait, that she was seen and heard, but that there were other people who had needs too.

When it was time for me to sit down with Meret at the loom, she burst into a stream of talk again, asking me what I had for lunch, whether my son had gone to school that day, not stopping to listen to an answer before coming out with another question. "Do you want to talk, or do you want to work?" I asked. "Work, work," she responded, and focused on her loom—at least for a few minutes. Seeing the rug she was weaving grow gave her a feeling of pride and accomplishment, and the repeated physical movements helped to calm the rushing flow of her thoughts. Sitting by her side, I noticed how I, too, became grounded and centered through this activity, called back from worry and agitation to the fundamental flow of creation.

I have frequently observed how the rhythm of weaving has a calming and healing effect. One day, another resident, Jan, was having a hard time. He wanted to vacuum the

weavery, a favorite task, but one that had to be limited so that others would not be constantly disturbed. He was very upset about this. Jan is nonverbal, but his anxiety was expressed in worried frowns, hard breathing, and sudden movements. I reminded him that Tuesday and Friday are vacuuming days, and invited him to sit at his loom.

He picked up the shuttle, and soon came into the comforting flow of the familiar pattern: throw, beat, change. At first he'd still stop often to frown at me and make agitated gestures, but after a while his posture relaxed and he even smiled. I smiled, too, grateful once more for the magic of weaving, for the way it can soothe our worried hearts and bring us back to our most joyful, creative selves.

The weaving together of our differing abilities and gifts into a single fabric of humanity reminds me of the qualities of warp and weft. We, the coworkers, are the ones who have to set up and warp the looms, creating a strong, stable structure that requires forethought and precision. But the residents provide the living, rhythmic activity that gives that structure meaning and makes it useful. When both sides are tended to with care, the result is beautiful.

Our individual selves only truly become what they are meant to be when we are in community with one another, when the warp and weft of our bodies and souls find their meaning in working together. Disabled? Abled? We are all just elements in one great creative project in which we each have our part to play. When I began this work ten years ago, I had no idea how much cultivating the skill of our hands would teach me about the wisdom of the heart. In that, our residents have been my best and wisest teachers, and I wish everyone could learn from them. Our world would be the better for it.

Lory Widmer Hess found her life transformed when she began working with developmentally disabled adults ten years ago. She now lives with her family in the Jura mountains of Switzerland and is in training as a spiritual director. Her book *When Fragments Make a Whole: A Personal Journey Through Healing Stories in the Bible* will be published in 2024 by Floris Books. Visit her website at enterenchanted.com.

Pilgrim

by Phil Cummins

Worryingly high. Not a tad high, or just a teensy bit on the high side. But *worryingly* high, as if the adjective needed some extra punch. That's how my healthcare provider described my cholesterol levels during a call to discuss the results of bloodwork. Not surprisingly, my middle-aged heart gave a little wobble as my anxious mind promptly worried up a future filled with cardiovascular concerns. This call was a blunt reminder that ageing inexorably pushes one ever closer to the high mileage category, a time when the body often decides it no longer wishes to cooperate as slavishly as it once did. It loses pace and starts to grumble and creak, periodically sending out urgent reminders of the need for a regular overhaul in order to maintain its roadworthiness. This call was one such reminder, and to maintain drivability I needed to reduce saturated and trans fats in my diet, ramp up my intake of soluble fibre, and take considerably more exercise. In other words, an end to all gustatorial joy and time to get fitted for new trainers. It was goodbye to fried food and takeouts, and hello to fresh fruit and workouts. Driving home, I began to imagine my stomach straining against the seatbelt, reinforcing the need for action.

One week later, my wife and I booked ourselves in for a pilgrimage along the Camino de Santiago in Northern Spain.

These two events, it should be said, are only *partly* connected.

On the matter of pilgrimages first. I'd always understood one to be a journey of some kind, a break from normal life in order to travel on foot towards a distant, sacred destination. Walking is the engine of pilgrimage, the physical process of placing one foot in front of the other and moving forward through the long days supposedly empowering one to look inwards and find some higher meaning, some deeper sense of the spiritual—*solvitur ambulando* made flesh, as it were. Undeniably one of the great Christian pilgrimages dating back to the Middle Ages, countless feet have trodden the meandering routes of the Camino de Santiago, all leading inexorably towards the great Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela where the remains of St James the Apostle are purported to be buried. By decree of Pope Calixtus II, walking the Camino during a 'Jacobean' or 'holy'

year when St James' Day falls on a Sunday, as it did in 2021, brings the rather nifty bonus of absolving one of all sin. As consolation for Covid restrictions, however, this bonus was, providentially for us, extended into 2022 by Pope Francis.

I could lie and say that I wanted to cleanse my sinful soul through a 119-kilometer trek beneath the broiling Spanish sun, but the fact that I'm a card-carrying atheist would probably render any earned plenary indulgence null and void. And whilst it would undoubtedly improve my waning fitness and help to slay the aforementioned cholesterol gremlin, I'd be pretending if I said that I was doing this solely for the much-needed physical health benefits.

The reality was far more humbling. I had become overly cloistered within my home by Ireland's seemingly never-ending pandemic restrictions, perpetually plugged into the online world of work, leaving me increasingly disconnected from people and fearful of inessential emergence from my comfortingly aseptic domestic bud. In my mind foreign travel had embarrassingly morphed into something terrifying, the very thought of it leaving me weak-kneed. It was as if lockdown had thrown a switch in my head, rendering me petrified of an activity I'd happily enjoyed for many years. This trip was the push I needed to break free of the psychological rut I was in, but would I be a fretful tourist or a resolute pilgrim? Would I spend my days ducking and diving from Covid infection, or would I leave my worries behind and seek renewal from within? Time would tell.

Our plan was to rendezvous in Madrid with a larger group comprising family members from both sides of the Atlantic, some not seen by me since childhood; nothing like long-lost relations to inject some spirited reminiscence into our perambulations. As complete novices to this type of venture, F— and I sought guidance from friends, thrice veterans of the Camino. "Whatever the hell you do, look after your feet," they rather predictably advised. "Plenty of corn plasters and coconut oil. And get into the habit of taking regular extended walks with a little backpack as a way of preparing yourselves for the unbroken six-day trek in Spain." Having fallen out of the habit of regular exercise, our devotion to the latter was sadly limited to the occasional country stroll (*minus* backpack), pausing regularly to catch our breath and smell the cow parsley; in walking terms, the gentlest nursery slopes of a typical Camino stage. We rationalized these lacklustre

preparations by telling ourselves that if worse came to worse we could always just dial up an Uber at any point on the trail and taxi to the next town for an early pint.

As departure day approached, however, the growing reality of the trip became a torment to me. It loomed like an imminent root canal. I struggled to raise any sense of anticipation and began to catastrophize wildly about everything, my anxieties frequently manifesting as sleepless nights and panic attacks. “It’s okay, love,” said F—, gathering me into an embrace as I sat sobbing and wrung out on the edge of the bed one night. “We don’t have to do this if you don’t want to. But I’ll be with you.” Not only was I over-thinking our less-than-perfect physical readiness, this had become an endeavour that was competing mercilessly with my by now well-conditioned impulse to remain enfolded within the four walls of our home.

I slept for most of the flight from Dublin. Upon waking I was greeted by a vile stench on the inside of the NK95 mask hermetically sealed around my mouth and nose. (Imagine spoiled cheese scraped out of a tramp’s shoe.) The final descent into Madrid revealed an endlessly hilly patchwork of parched olive greens and sandy browns delicately embroidered with pale winding roads, all so different from the verdant topography of the country we’d just left behind. The Spanish interior in June screamed HOT!

In the days that followed, the seeming strangeness of undertaking a pilgrimage despite lacking anything resembling a religious bone in my body would come to occupy my thoughts. Although reared as Roman Catholic, I knew from an early age that organised religion and I were destined to part company, the whole endeavour simply too inflexible and stultifying to my inquisitive mind. And so faith has always belonged to the realm of the intangible for me, the inimitable Jan Morris summing up my views to absolute perfection: *‘It is futile to think that religious faith is anything more than useful discipline and consolation, sustained by wishful thinking.’* And yet, I’ve always been inexplicably captivated by churches and cathedrals, a fact that may afford some tiny sliver of room to maneuver around this incongruence. I marvel at their visual pageantry and the eclectic jumble of humanity they draw in. Their echoing quietude also appeals to my introverted nature and reminds me that they are still historical places of sanctuary worth experiencing.

A visit to the Church of San Jeronimo el Real during our brief Madrid stopover, a sixteenth century church a mere stone's throw from The Prado, brought this incongruence into focus. It being a Sunday, F— and I had only just begun pottering about the church to admire the glorious interior when a choir struck up to announce the arrival of the priest, a small wizened man in a flowing ruby surplice. Opting to stay, we took our seats as he strode towards the altar to commence mass. The key to surviving any ceremony one has zero spiritual investment in is to become an aficionado of observation, and so it should be said that there is surely nothing more graceful than Spanish women of a certain age attending Sunday mass. With their immaculately coiffed waterfalls of silvery-grey hair and exquisitely tailored outfits of loosely flowing silks and satins, they are the very essence of classy ageing, the silence between hymns occasionally broken by the well-practiced flick of a wrist and gentle bird's wing swish of a fan to cool their enigmatic looks. The priest gave a mesmerizing sermon demonstrating vocal dynamics that Placido Domingo would've been proud of, his voice oscillating between whispering soft and towering crescendo with an undiluted passion for his subject—although what that subject was I had utterly no idea on account of it all being in Spanish. But still, I found myself wholly entertained by the experience. What faith I still lacked in a deity, I had reinforced in religious pomp and people watching.

We departed Madrid, a motley crew of fourteen distributed between a car and minibus. Journeying northwest over 500 kilometers across the central Iberian plateau, the sudden ecological transition from baked landscape to temperate forest as one enters Galicia is something of a sensory jolt, the geographical equivalent of Platform 9¾ as one magically slides from one ecosystem into another. Clouds inexplicably appear out of nowhere to scud across the sky, the arid heat of the interior falls away, a gentle breeze strikes up, the eye begins to register an abundance of green, and a familiar sense of belonging takes hold. We arrived into Tui by early evening, a charming medieval town seemingly carved out of solid granite and located on the banks of the Minho looking across towards Portugal. Tired and thirsty, we descended en masse on one of the local bars like migrating wildebeest at a watering hole to rehydrate for nearly two hours. Anticipating an eye-watering bar tab, you could've knocked me over with a feather when

the entire bill only came to two figures. *Bienvenido a Galicia!* Afterwards, our Camino guide, José, insisted on a midnight tour of Tui and its magnificent cathedral perched on a hill like a gigantic stone sentinel overlooking the town. A native of the Spanish northwest, every atom of him resonated with pride and enthusiasm as he related his country's ancient heritage.

Tui to Porriño (sixteen kilometers): We set off out of Tui to the clickity-clack symphony of scores of walking poles striking the pavement like tinny maracas, unmissable in our matching fluorescent 'Celtic Camino Cousins' vests. Occasionally the locals would send a *"Buen Camino!"* in our direction, something which never failed to hearten me. Leaving town, we passed the first of many stone markers displaying a yellow scallop shell, the traditional symbol of pilgrimage, the shell's diagonal lines emanating outwards from a single point supposedly signifying the various routes drawing pilgrims towards Santiago. I felt invincible, all thoughts of the pandemic fading to triviality as I soaked up the glorious rural panorama. This was a landscape that seemed to be greeting us with open arms. I convinced myself that I could actually feel those poxy cholesterol levels plummeting through the very soles of my trail boots.

By the eight-kilometer mark I felt as if I'd been kicked senseless by a demented donkey. Sweating profusely, my back and shoulders aching against my overfull backpack, I folded into a café chair gasping for coffee and carbs. Having only applied sunblock to my face and neck before setting off, a nasty dose of sunburn had already taken hold on my right arm and leg—essentially, the east-facing plane of my body as I trekked northwards—and by day's end I'd look like I'd been toasted on one side. I sloped out of the café, annoyed with myself for such lack of selfcare, the stone marker gaily proclaiming *only* another 111 kilometers to go. Tottering into a sun-baked Porriño by mid-afternoon, the bones and muscles of my back and shoulders at war with one another, I made straight for the bar and a waiting beer to coax out the endorphins and ease me into blissfulness.

Porriño to Redondela (fourteen kilometers): When you walk through Galician forests, as we did en route to Redondela, everything is shadowy, woody, leafy, rustling and uneven. Occasionally, the plaintive sound of a lone Galician bagpiper unfurls from

somewhere amongst the trees like a will o' the wisp to draw you onwards and distract you from your aches. Great lumps of granite abound and arboreal invaders hide in plain sight. The invaders, of course, are the eucalypts. What was it AA Gill said about eucalypts? *'Those antipodean trees that drink like Australians and are good for nothing much more than admiring and burning.'* The damn things were absolutely everywhere! Eucalyptus seeds first brought back from Australia in the eighteenth century, most likely by Sir Joseph Banks, are believed to be responsible for the introduction of the species into Europe. For decades the Spanish government encouraged the planting of these incredibly fast growing trees as a way of boosting the timber and pulp industries. A highly invasive species, this inevitably disrupted the natural biosphere of the Galician forests, skewing the normal balance of flora and fauna, parching the soil and displacing traditional Atlantic woodland species like oak, chestnut, and birch, not to mention increasing the risk of forest fires and causing pollution of natural waterways. Not surprisingly, local conservation groups now want them eradicated, and in this mission I wish them well although the expression 'pissing up a rope' seems appropriate; judging from the sheer numbers of eucalypts I observed, I suspect they'll still be hogging the bed and making baby eucalypts long after I've returned to the soil.

Redondela to Pontevedra (twenty-one kilometers): Setting out after breakfast I was delighted to discover that the aches and pains which had risen up in me like damp over the past couple of days had all but evaporated. My calves felt tighter, my arms and shoulders stronger, my back virtually pain free, my backpack weightless. I felt as if my entire body was pliantly remodelling itself to meet the challenge. Which was just as well because the trek to Pontevedra entailed some sharp elevation and rocky ground. Our route took us into the beautiful maritime town of Arcade straddling the Verdugo River just before it pours into the Bay of Vigo—the nautical purlieu of one of Verne's great fictional adventurers, Captain Nemo—and onwards through countless hamlets all testifying to the horticultural wizardry of Galician homeowners who seem able to conjure virtually anything from the soil. The entire region dripped with rural charm—from the cruciform-capped stone granaries raised up on stilts to protect the harvested grain from rats, to the disused stone basins or 'lavaderos' where locals traditionally did their laundry, long since given

over to water weeds and grackling alive with frogs and insects. In many places the parallel indentations of ancient wagon wheels scored into the path from centuries of trundling goods to market served as a sort of primitive GPS.

Unfortunately for walkers, the Camino Way is also infested with cyclists. I say 'infested' because they swarmed past us like locusts consuming the pathway, often exuding a vastly overinflated sense of entitlement to the trail. Radiating rude health poured into skin tight lycra, they'd whiz by us in packs on tricked-up mountain bikes. Word of their speedy approach would periodically filter up the trail warning everyone to promptly step aside to avoid getting flattened. Occasionally one of them had a boom box strapped to his back belting out what sounded like naff re-runs of the Eurovision Song Contest. Once or twice I seriously considered jamming one of my walking poles through the spokes of a passing bike wheel just for the thrill of sending one of the selfish gits over his handlebars, but I restrained myself; this was a pilgrimage after all, plus I didn't fancy getting the shite kicked out of me.

As water typically follows the path of least resistance, so too does respite. Locating a fast-flowing stream upon reaching the outskirts of Pontevedra, we took off our boots and soaked our feet in the icy cold water, gasping with pleasure. Had a blind man walked by at that exact moment he probably would've heard what sounded for all the world like an alfresco orgy. To atone for such prurience, I added Pontevedra's exquisite Church of the Pilgrim Virgin to my list of visited ancient havens later that evening.

Pontevedra to Caldas de Reis (twenty-two kilometers): We seemed to rise earlier and with one less person each new day, three of our troupe having pulled up lame and requiring taxi service. Sunrise had just started to rinse the sky a pale shade of aquamarine as we set out, our exodus observed by youthful Spanish revellers fresh from a night on the tiles and queuing up for kebabs.

Pilgrimage can be an insular endeavour, much of it spent locked up inside one's own head. This Camino, however, seemed to have knocked all the rough edges off me, made me less standoffish. As the day wore on I came to recognize the now familiar faces of other pilgrims on the trail and fell easily into conversations. One woman I spoke to, a retired teacher from Montreal, had walked all the way up from Seville, a journey of over

1000 kilometers and forty-four days! Looking as fresh as a daisy, she probably could've strolled all the way back without breaking a sweat. And then there was the middle-aged American couple who had walked all the way up from Porto: she, plump and jolly; he, vast and belligerent looking. Shuffling along on tree trunk-sized legs that supported an XXXL frame and pendulous stomach, a comically dainty little backpack strapped across his bear-like back, his face wore a chronically aggrieved expression as if regretting ever having heard the word 'Camino' in the first place. Every ounce of his resolve was being channelled into propelling himself forward, his every step a live exhibition of ache and agitation. "You're doin' great honey!" his wife would regularly call after him as she followed thirty feet or so behind, chivvying him along. "This was actually all *his* idea," she grinned wickedly, keeping her voice lowered so as to avoid aggravating him further.

We reached Caldas de Reis by early afternoon, the final stretch taking us through a local vineyard, the overhanging vines sagging with Galicia's famous Albariño grape. Ignoring the sign that said 'Please Do Not Pick The Grapes', I picked a grape to sample it and winced at what tasted like a sour gooseberry. That this little pea-sized thing would eventually become the divinely agreeable grog that flowed freely from the many jugs ordered to our dinner table that evening never ceases to amaze me. We ended the day visiting the town's famed healing geothermal springs or 'caldas' to allow Mother Nature to kiss our sore feet.

Caldas de Reis to Padrón (twenty-one kilometers): Yet another dawn start as the cock crowed us on our way out of town, harmonizing with the percussion of dozens of walking poles striking roads and footpaths. Before setting off I had to take a brass pin to lance the assorted blisters now angrily bubbling up on my poor wife's feet before strapping up her heels and toes with corn plasters so that she could carefully squeeze into her boots.

"Will you be alright?" I asked. "Are you still able for this?"

"Sure, I'll be grand," F— winced. "Once I get a coffee and pastry into me, I'll be good to go."

Every time I thought she was going to throw in the towel and just hail a cab, she dug a little deeper and soldiered on.

Padrón to Santiago de Compostela (twenty-five kilometers): Dawn at a tiny café in Padrón and the owner, a giant swarthy Galician who reminded me of Brutus from those early Popeye cartoons, having served us all coffee and croissants then demonstrated his famed reputation for hugging and kissing pilgrims before sending them on the final leg of their journey. He gave me a rib-cracking bear hug and almost ruptured my eardrum with a raucous *"BUEN CAMINO!"* His beard prickled the side of my face like a nail brush, his breath warm with the potent scent of espresso.

We took this long final leg at our own trudging pace, José and the others regularly casting out WhatsApp fishing lines from far ahead to pinpoint us and continually reel us in towards Santiago. A proper sizzler of a day, the air clung to us like a warm sheet as we pushed on through the morning and afternoon, taking advantage of any freshwater streams and outdoor taps to allow F—— to soak and rest her poor feet. We eventually reached the sprawling outer suburbs of the city just as a primary school tour group comprising several dozen pupils materialised ahead of us to swarm exuberantly down the Camino Way like army ants. Literally combusting with joy, they hooted and skipped and piggy-backed, chattering and squawking and high-fiving one another—all the things adorably innocent young kids should be doing. And in that precise moment I hated every last one of them. I was tired, hot, cranky, footsore, and desperately impatient to reach the finish line as I pictured the rest of our group already slurping their first round of cocktails and ordering starters. I needed this to end. What business did these deliriously happy little brats have blocking *our* pilgrim trail and delaying *our* tortuous pilgrim progress? Surely they should've all been in school. I breathed a sigh of relief when they finally disappeared down the trail ahead of us, leaving us in peace again.

It was only as we rounded a corner several minutes later, however, that we unexpectedly encountered them all quietly lined up along either side of the road poised to give us an extended round of applause and to loudly cheer us on our way. "*BUEN CAMINO! BUEN CAMINO! BRAVO!"* In that instant I thought my heart would burst, blasting asunder any crabbiness and bringing me out in smiles. I decided then and there that I adored each and every one of them, would have adopted them if possible. To have these wonderful children celebrating our hard efforts like this was to be engulfed in a cloud of contentment, a tangible feeling of accomplishment that swept us up and buoyed us

along until our final valedictory walk into the great square of the Praza do Obradoiro to stand wearily before Santiago de Compostela's mighty Cathedral. This, for me, was the moment of 'peak' Camino. If pilgrimage is a journey that leads you to know yourself a bit better and dispel your fears, to appreciate the precious gift that is good health, then I felt every inch the pilgrim in that moment as I gaped contentedly at the majestic sight before me.

"You know, I did this for you," said F—, as we took a moment away from the group.

"G'way out of that," I replied. But in my head I was really thinking, *…and thank goodness for me you did, girl.*

Two days later, much rested and several pounds lighter, we were rambling contentedly about Santiago's old town with its warren of narrow streets and cobbled laneways when a pigeon perched on an overhead sign took a shit on my head. Not having any tissue paper to hand, I rooted in my backpack and pulled out my spare face mask, smiling inwardly at the realisation that I'd all but forgotten about it since landing in Spain nearly a fortnight earlier. *So much for being a fretful tourist,* I thought. I used it to wipe the shit out of my hair and scalp before chucking it into the rubbish bin.

"They say that a bird shitting on your head is a sign of good luck to come,"
F — cheerfully informed me.

"That's just an old wives' tale," I replied. Like faith, luck was for me another of life's intangibles.

Our return flight to Dublin was uneventful. Loading up our car, we got on the road for home. Somewhere along the M50 an SUV sidled up next to us, its passenger urgently pointing upwards to the roof of our car as we sped along. Pulling over onto the hard shoulder, I got out to take a look. There was my wallet, unthinkingly placed there as I was fiddling with the car keys, weighed down with coins and stuffed to the gills with cash, credit cards and various forms of ID. Getting back into the car, I tossed it up onto the dashboard in amazement. "That was some stroke of luck," I said, chuffed with myself. "Would've been an absolute pain in the arse to have to replace everything in there." My wife very wisely kept her own counsel and I drove on, grinning like an idiot behind the wheel.

Phil Cummins is an Irish academic and writer of fiction and non-fiction. His work is published in *Crannóg, Fictive Dream, bioStories*, and elsewhere. He has also achieved both honourable mention (2020 anthology) and shortlist (2022) for the Fish Memoir Prize.

Max Krasner

65 Boston Street (home)
540 Market Street (business)
Newark, New Jersey

"Newark's Milk Station #1 Owner"

"If these stations are the means of saving but a single life during the entire summer, all the labor, time and money they have cost will be repaid a thousand fold."—*Newark Evening Star*, August 16, 1915

Objective: To find a wife even Mama approves of.

EDUCATION
Kheder, Borisov, Russia
Apprentice joiner, Borisov, Russia (good at math, I can calculate in my head)
Night school to become a US citizen, Central School, Newark, NJ
Acquired first papers, Newark, NJ

IMMIGRATION
1899 SS Rotterdam from Rotterdam, Holland

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE
1915-Present Opportunist with an altruistic twist

Used the *Newark Evening Star* photograph to give to the matchmaker. Everyone loves a business owner, I'm told. The photograph shows me in action, ready to take an order, a friend of neighborhood children to keep them out of trouble. I'm good with kids.

1913-Present Grocer
Skilled in translating customer needs to available consumer goods. Expert understanding of the immigrant experience (especially Jews, Italians, Poles, Portuguese, Spanish), including tight budgets and needy children. Developed noticeable reputation for cleanliness and professionalism, so the newspaper said.

1904-1913 Furniture Salesman, Edwin A. Kirch
Worked my way up to clerk and then salesman. I know a good piece of furniture from dreck. I learned and lived the company's motto, "Don't just sell furniture, do it in a friendly way." I brought in a steady paycheck, which Mama appreciated, but totally happy I wasn't. I left to own my own business.

1899-1904 Laborer, Newark Tannery
Frankly, I've tried to put this out of my mind. But what was a newcomer to do? I took the first job that came my way: dipping shoelaces into leather. It will be something to tell my future children about.

AWARDS
1915 *Newark Evening Star* choice for the city's Milk Station #1 because my store is the cleanest in this Ironbound (that means on the other side of the tracks) and I'm a neatnik. In my station, I provide Grade A milk to the poor so the babies and children stop dying from Grade B milk that's been contaminated on its 300-mile ride to Newark in unrefrigerated train cars.

Results: The week my milk station opened, 15 babies under the age of one died, the deaths blamed on poisoned milk. An analysis conducted by the *Newark Evening Star* evaluated milk sold in 15 Ward 5 stores. The study found such a high amount of bacteria, that it's no wonder babies were dying. Fourteen of the stores, clearly none of them mine, sold milk with illegally high levels of bacteria.

MEDIA EXPERIENCE
1915 Gave interviews to *Newark Evening Star* about how I dedicated a room at the back of the store to the milk station. Cleaned, painted, and outfitted it for this function. Under the Board of Health's supervision, carpeted the room with oilcloth and furnished with tables for instructional materials.

LANGUAGES
Yiddish
Russian
English

MARITAL STATUS
Soon to be matched and engaged, with the help of this piece of paper.
Note: Max Krasner was the author's grandfather. The photo is of Mr. Krasner in front of his Market Street Grocery store in Newark, NJ. The author found the photo on a matchmaker's card given to her by a Krasner cousin.

Barbara Krasner holds an MFA from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her work has been featured in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Nimrod*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *South 85*, *The Smart Set*, *museum of americana*, and elsewhere. She lives and teaches in New Jersey.

Walks with Caribou

by Michael Engelhard

It is my last day guiding a weeklong backpacking trip in mid-July from the East Fork of the Chandalar to the headwaters of the Hulahula. We are camped on the western bank of the Hulahula in the broad, treeless valley an Ice-Age-glacier incised. Because the morning is drizzly, my peeps still hide inside their sleeping bags. Over a contemplative cup of Joe in the kitchen area—a stone's throw away from our tents—I notice shifts in what in the flat light resembles a boulder field.

"You might want to come outside. The whole hillside is crawling with caribou," I rouse the sleepyheads, unaware yet that I'm seeing a vanguard of ten thousand, a quarter mile down the valley, a prong of the Porcupine herd's southbound trans-border migration. I feel we have suddenly struck it rich.

We soon sit and breakfast, quietly, for about three hours, afraid that a loud word or brash gesture would turn the approaching herd. When it reaches our campsite, the tide

of furred bodies divides and flows around us. The animals' gamey, dense musk hangs in the air. We hear arthritic old-man grunts and with each step the clicking from cartilage that pulls back their hooves and helps them save energy. The animals are fat from the sedges, willow leaves, flowers, and mushrooms clothing the Arctic Coastal Plain. Cows have shed their antlers after dropping gangly calves there in early June, reallocating their bodies' calcium for milk, but bulls are still geared up for the fall rut near the tree line.

Having broken camp after realizing that our presence does not deter them, we hike against the current, down-valley through the herd without causing so much as a ripple. The drifters eye us inquiringly: *Don't you know winter is coming? You are headed the wrong way!* They're ready to tackle Guilbeau Pass, a Brooks Range gateway in the Continental Divide commemorating the twenty-six-year-old son of a Black pastor and scout leader, a geology student who died there in the early seventies on a solo quest from Arctic Village to Barter Island.

After the rush has subsided, we travel freshly churned grooves, past wisps of fleece caught in bushes and dung pellets soft in the tracks. We run into stragglers. Five cows shadowed by their stilt-legged offspring—the Moms; a bull with a dozen cows—the Harem; and, heartbreaking, the Casualty, a calf limping after its mother. The doe keeps turning back as if to encourage the little fellow, but we're certain it will end up feeding a bear or some wolves. Tooth and claw will distribute a share of this wealth.

The Inupiat's neighbors in Arctic Village, 150 roadless miles to the south, call themselves the "Caribou People." They, as well as the residents of fourteen other Gwich'in villages on both sides of the US–Canada border, depend on the Porcupine caribou herd. It provides over half of all food for Gwich'in families plus material for clothing and tools and for stories, dances, and songs. Twice a year, the slopes and flats come alive as caribou hone in on their destination: summer calving and grazing ranges on the refuge's coastal plain—which under Trump were slated for drilling—and wintering sites in the boreal conifer belt, Vinijàatan, where caribou "settle down and lie around and just eat." This journey—reminiscent of early nineteenth century bison abundance, upward of 200,000 caribou at last count—is the continent's largest land-mammal trek, and at 3,000

miles, the planet's longest. By the age of nine, an average lifespan for a caribou lucky enough to survive calfhood, a cow will have effectively circumnavigated the globe.

The villagers named the refuge's contested 1002 Area, a nursery almost as big as Delaware, Iizhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit, "The Sacred Place Where Life Begins." Their creation story reminds all Gwich'in that humans and caribou were one once, long ago. When they split, they kept a piece of the others' heart inside their own, so their fate and their health will forever be linked. While caribou nourish the people, people should take no more than they need and protect the herd and its home, which also is theirs. It is disrespectful to waste any meat, to touch the living animals, or to kill them in a manner that causes suffering. Gwich'in hunters let the vanguard pass, fearing the herd could turn as these veteran caribous lead the rest between their summer and winter ranges. Tradition dictated that their Eskimo neighbors not butcher animals or leave bones near migration routes, from concern that this would spook any herds.

"We have a spiritual connection to caribou. They are everything to us," says Sarah James, an elder and board member of the Gwich'in Steering Committee, spearhead of resistance against oil development. For the Gwich'in, preserving the caribou and their range is a social justice issue and an environmental one.

Biologists and the Gwich'in fear declines of the herd mirroring slumps in Canada and Siberia. As environmental conditions change, so do caribou highways. Gwich'in hunters in Arctic Village remark that, as the region gets bushier with willows and alders marching north in lockstep with climate change, sighting game now is harder. On average, the Arctic greens two weeks earlier than it used to, and pregnant cows reach the smorgasbord too late for their calves to take full advantage. Consequently, more, weakened offspring succumb to wolf packs, diseases, lone bears, parasites, or the elements. Still, the herd's losses translate into carnivores' gains only short-term, until starvation catches up with *them*. If caribou numbers nosedive, zealots will surely blame wolves and clamor again for drastic controls—the aerial shooting of packs and the baiting of bears.

To me, caribou have been teachers rather than dinner or competition. They choose the most straightforward route always (at least from their perspective), like water seeking the path of least resistance. Yet they avoid ankle-busting cobbles and brush and prefer

stretches that afford views of slinking predators. I'd like to think big game laid out all our original roads. Flying through tussocks, causing speed envy in me, caribou high-step while throwing their legs sideways like flappers doing the Charleston. They sail through swamps where I founder. I follow their trails especially when they cut through alder thickets or traverse steep scree, though the narrower caribou hips can make walking in the ruts awkward.

You appreciate the web wandering generations have scored into turf differently when you're airborne. At times, it braids like the North Slope's gravelly rivers, since herd members too can be choosy, steering divergent courses. In passes or similar bottlenecks, multiple strands become single lanes, tokens of one directional will. Staying on tracks, besides being safer, saves calories. Break a leg in this country, and you're in trouble. Running on empty spells the same. The routine inherent in trail hiking relieves the mind of route-finding tasks. This allows flights of fancy, and I wonder where caribou aim that freed mental focus.

Treading caribou trails I, for one, can better scan my surroundings for beauty and threats. I seldom resist donning cast-off antlers, impersonating a 'bou. Doing so, I look over one shoulder for hungry grizzlies.

I've always been lucky on the Hulahula, except for one scary bear charge. Thrice I've witnessed the timeless congregation there. Approaching Old Woman Creek, a Hula tributary, on my wife's birthday, our Cessna banked above the gravel landing strip, and we faced tundra teeming, oddly flecked. Momentarily spooked, dozens of caribou splashed through the shallows before climbing the loamy far bank. While elk lope, moose stilt, and deer pogo, caribou tiptoe through tussocks at top speeds, ballerinas among the Cervidae. Think *Swan Lake* performed in a swamp but more scattered, less choreographed.

Multitudes milled about, or surged like a tawny flood into foothills. As the pilot throttled the engine and swooped in for a touchdown near the river, a cow and her calf cleared the runway barely ahead of the propeller. It felt like having a front seat on *Animal Planet*.

By the time we had sorted our gear, the departing plane's drone had faded back to silence. The animals had settled down, attending to the matter at hand—putting on pounds. It was June, and the Porcupine herd was fueling up for its return to the woodlands in late July.

Having pitched tents on top of a knob that also housed a ground squirrel colony, we observed the scattered crowd, when one of my clients spotted a griz'.

"What's it got in its mouth?" he asked.

Through my binocs, I saw. A bloody hindquarter so large it dragged on the muskeg. Just then, another bear on the opposite bank waded in to join this free-for-all.

Needless to say, I did not sleep well that night.

My own attempts to get Arctic venison into my belly and freezer have amounted to nothing tangible. The first time, about to drive north on the Haul Road toward Deadhorse, Prudhoe Bay with my neighbor and friend, all packed up and piled in, we did not even leave the driveway. His truck wouldn't start. The second time, two National Outdoor Leadership School instructors and I managed to reach the Brooks Range, where zero caribou entered our crosshairs. Sitting around our campfire, so much younger then, we took potshots at a shirt I'd volunteered and hung from a spruce tree. I wore it for years afterward, proudly displaying the bullet holes.

Michael Engelhard is the author of *Ice Bear: The Cultural History of an Arctic Icon* and, most recently, of the memoir *Arctic Traverse: A Thousand-Mile Summer of Trekking the Brooks Range*. He lives in Fairbanks, Alaska, and guided wilderness trips for twenty-five years.

* Photograph of Caribou trails in the northern foothills of the Brooks Range is by Lisa Hupp, US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Sleeping Dogs

by Clare Simons

My husband tells the story of the sleeping dog over a thousand cups of chai, across hectares of land, on stalled express trains, and into the heart of India. He sees grace in the story. I see the future. It all begins with Shiva.

The filthy mongrel is asleep. Not a flea moves, disrupting his dreams of *chapatis* and lentils fried in ghee. His scarred ears flop on the cool concrete and shut out the din of the train station. Burlap sacks of mustard seeds shield his mangy hind from dusty feet, toppling bundles, and thrashing sticks. The stray has claimed a safe hideout for the night.

My husband sprints to the ticket window, rupees in hand, ready to pay for our one-way, second-class, sleeper berths to Tiruvannamalai and the holy mountain of Lord Shiva, The Supreme God of Creation and Destruction. He does not see the dog or hear me scream.

Fangs through flesh—down to the bone—blood through khaki. The mutt vanishes into the electric air. Scott staggers, genuflects before the inescapable forces of India. The mongrel's bite unleashes *Kundalini shakti—She Who Is Coiled* at the base of the spine—amps his *Ida* and *Pingala* channels, pulsing currents of pink and blue light through all 72,000 *nadi's*—clears his *Ajna* chakra—unlocks the door to the glory of Brahman. Shiva's bite is a grace. *Diksha* is bestowed.

In a gasp, in a heartbeat, my husband is initiated.

A good Samaritan raises Scott to his feet. The man's eyes dart from Scott's bloody leg to his ghostly face, then settle on me. "Hospital," the man says, "I take. I call. No problem."

I nod, *yes*, and mean, *Whatever you think; I have no idea*.

The man slings Scott's limp arm over his narrow shoulders and drags my husband out of the train station to a parking lot filled with motorcycles. Scott holds tight to the unbidden savior's small waist and is whisked away down an alley crowded with women in saris carrying bundles on their heads and into a traffic circle of *putt-putts* at evening rush hour. Scott never looks back.

I take a cab to our hotel and wait for the call.

His rescuer takes Scott to a government hospital and leads him to a window in the wall where they are handed a flimsy slip of paper. They pass through a screen door, down a green-tiled hallway lined with white plastic lawn chairs populated by gap-mouthed men, gaunt, impassive women, and children too lifeless to cry.

A security guard leads Scott and his helper into a dank room. Scott nearly faints when he sees the high stone pedestal slab with a hose stuffed into a putrid drain in the concrete floor of the morgue. A lightbulb sparks off and on overhead. The security guard gestures to the table and Scott obeys; he sits.

“Soap?” the guard says.

“Soap?” Scott says.

His helper nods yes and runs from the room, returning, minutes later, with a small bar of soap covered in wax paper that cost two-rupees. The guard pulls the hose out of the drain and washes the blood off Scott's pants and knee. He soaps and rinses the wound many times, then stuffs the hose back down the drain. Scott grips the cold stone and almost falls but his ally catches him by the waistband.

“Doctor is there,” the guard says, pointing, and leads them into another fetid room.

A smug, young government doctor examines Scott’s leg and gives him a shot for rabies and a prescription for five more injections.

“Stitches?” Scott asks.

“No stitches. Not in the tropics.” The doctor scribbles something on their now-limp admittance slip and hands it to Scott’s helper.

“Keep the wound clean. Pay outside.”

He points at a filthy sheet that covers another door, mutters something that must have meant “Next” into the air, and an auntie wobbles in, propped up by two adoring schoolgirls.

His benefactor leads Scott to a sunny courtyard rimmed by more of the lawn chairs and pots of red geraniums.

“Take rest,” he says, and puts a dusty bottle of orange soda into Scott’s trembling hand.

Scott downs the drink. “What is your name?”

“Anish, it means *He Who Keeps Good Company.* Krishna is my God.”

Anish leads Scott to the Cashier’s Desk where two civil servants, vestiges from the Crown, rock on the back legs of their white plastic chairs and sip chai. One bureaucrat scratches himself and returns to his large font newspaper.

“Two-hundred rupees. Correct change,” the other says.

Scott pays his debt, about five dollars, with currency that feels like cloth. The laconic worker stamps the paper with the panache of a monarch’s seal and dismisses Scott with a wave of a fat finger.

Scott tries to put a twenty-dollar bill into Anish’s hand, but he waggles his head in protest. Scott tries again after the motorcycle ride back to our hotel, but the man disappears into the shadows and a sea of vehicles back in evening’s rush hour traffic.

Scott Rice

Despite medical evidence that there isn’t an iota of proof in the *Mortality & Morbidity Study,* a 452-page HMO report compiled by the team of physicians who supervised Scott’s death and the in-house risk-management attorneys who covered their ass and by two sweet friends with advanced medical degrees who gingerly read the document and told me the rabies virus from the dog did not attach to my husband’s ganglia, and no pathogens bided their time in his bloodstream, despite all this—I believe a different truth.

It was the rapture of Lord Shiva that called the pathogens to rise up, burst through the gross, casual, astral and etheric bodies, spew sepsis into the white blood cells, urine, brain and bring my warrior to his knees for one last surrender to The One who whispered “Come with me on a joy ride with the top down on Saturday night along Main Street, across Route 66, up the coast road, fly over Carmel-by-the-Sea, be the envy of those who know a hero in a classic ride when they see one, go beyond the cosmology of the three worlds fourteen planes five spheres thirty-six evolutes three bodies five sheaths and merge in the universal I Am That.

Cha Cha Cha.

All Is Shiva.

Clare Simons' essays about Amma, India's hugging saint were published in Parabola and *Spirituality & Health* Magazines. "The Greatest" appeared on the official Muhammad Ali website along with works by Joyce Carol Oats and Norman Mailer. Her creative nonfiction can be found on *Anti-Heroin Chic, Faith Hope & Fiction, Manifest Station, The Write Launch* and *Persimmon Tree*. Simons was the press person and gatekeeper to the stories of the terminally ill patient-plaintiffs defending Oregon's Death With Dignity Act at the U.S. Supreme Court, and worked for passage of assisted dying laws in several states. Publication of her memoir is forthcoming. To learn more, visit her website: https://www.clare-simons.com/

Note: Scott Rice (1949-2016) was a mover of people and things. After retiring, he traveled into the heart of India, her villages, as disaster-relief volunteer for Embracing The World, a global humanitarian and charitable NGO, founded by his guru Sri Mata Amritandamayi. For more information visit their website.

At the River

by Sydney Lea

This strange tale unfolds by moving water in Wyoming. It's a fisherman's story, involving an enviable spot to cast a fly, so out of an inveterate angler's secrecy, I won't specify the exact location, though I'll never go back there now.

All you need is a picture in any case. Early September. I could see slate canyons, hawks and eagles soaring all day, more than my liveliest imagination could have conjured, through air so clear that it winked with frost at sunrise. That world, of course, contained more, much more. And yes, the river running by my camp teemed with trout.

Never had I believed so completely in the sufficiency of quotidian *things,* a sense bound up with what I'll remember in this account. Let me state something right off that will become more and more obvious. Sometimes I'm a person too bent on finding connections among things I observe, even, or perhaps especially, when most of the observations are inner and visionary, if you'll forgive that grandiose word. Is this the sort of thing you also do? I mean, do you make up some narrative that threads things together by way of what we glibly call *mere imagination*? Is your narrative for that reason flatly untrue? I won't tip my hand on such a matter. Not yet.

But back to those everyday things. I'd slipped into that splendid corner of the world as easily as I might have into bath water—no struggle, no ripple. I might have been carried there on air. I'd hyperbolize if I said that I became, as sentimentalists sometimes claim, *one with my environment,* but that's how my thoughts tended. All day, I watched late-summer clouds of ephemerids hatch and lift from the water. An indescribable radiance poured through those countless, lacy wings. The frantically feeding fish were a challenge and a glory to anyone tossing fine steel and feather onto the big river, whose mirror-like surface belied its power.

One noon I so forgot myself that I wandered midstream, no footing left, the current washing me south. It was deep and rough there, yet I was full of vague thanks that I'd held onto my rod. I eventually made my way to the shallows and put the whole adventure out of mind. I struggled out of my chest waders and emptied them. Surrounded by all

manner of brilliance, I scarcely felt the wet of my clothes. And all day long, those hefty, eager trout. I'd have no cause to exaggerate my fishing stories.

Most days I'm like anyone else: I take a step at a time, my hours consumed for the most part by small matters. That sort of existence feels comfortable, even gratifying now and then. But I can get a yen for something I vaguely construe as higher. I'm sure the same urge comes on everyone now and again. The days I'm attempting to describe felt mystical, but again, physical details remained a central, all but exclusive part in that feeling.

Those details kept me from wanting anything beyond what lay at my disposal each day. As for a higher dominion, I woke up before dawn each morning to stars sown on the sky in their millions and that miraculous river's lisp, a day of splendor looming just beyond the evanescing darkness. Who needed more?

Once out of my tent, I'd melt skim-ice in a smutted kettle over a small but adequate fir-twig fire, whose smoke was so redolent it made me sigh. I'd sit on a bank among a few hardy, remnant wildflowers, warming my hands on a favorite tin cup until the beach stones dried and the mist climbed from the river. I'd hear the first redtail's or eagle's shriek, would watch ouzels wading along the banks, probing the shallows for nymphs. As the graceful mayflies hatched, the fish would rise for them. *Wake. Cook. Fish. Cook. Sleep. Wake.* Even my blue tin cup seemed sacramental. So sustaining did this daily life seem that I resented my trips to the tiny nearby town for tinned milk, bacon, coffee, whatever.

Among the few people I encountered in that patch of Wyoming were some, especially the barroom cowboys, who labored at local color for the sake of an easterner. The less they could actually provide, the more they invented in anecdote: "By Golly, I'll tell you what!"—and so on, all flamboyance.

The old man keeping the store was entirely different: taciturn, almost sullen, although what I saw may have been no more than some quietist reserve. His shop held a clutter of crosses, skulls, and strange shamanic figures. And something in his blade-thin presence hinted at more than a past of bodily struggle—intractable cattle, wind-lashed winters, wearisome calving, stringing barbed wire, and so on.

What I respected in that proprietor may have been no more than evidence of a soul gone bitter with age, but in my strange zeal, his bearing implied to me that getting and spending were, if not quite sins, just necessary nuisances in his view.

I'd put off my shopping until I was down to nothing but fish and water, and I did have a perverse attraction to the storekeeper's almost icy demeanor. Beyond a need for food, one also has habits, good and bad: a pipe; some sweets; caffeine. I entered the little store, whose owner would scarcely say three words at a time. Three he said to me on my next to last morning were "John the Baptist."

Why on earth the Biblical allusion, I wondered? I stood perplexed until the old trader jerked his head toward a window behind him. I saw a young man at the back of the little building, hardly more than a boy from the looks. He sat cross-legged on the ground, sprigs of sage in his hair and beard. Gaunt and hollow-eyed, he'd been living, it seems, in the high desert to eastward, or so he'd told this clearly unimpressed older fellow with whom I shared terse conversation.

The boy wore a pack that showed a rough-sewn symbol for peace, a gigantic yellow flower, and a row of self-approving words: *I'm With the Righteous.* The storekeeper curled his lip in a sneer. I left.

Immediately after that visit for provisions, I began to feel that I'd be yanked from a dream of paradise, that I'd now go back home bereft, anything but rejuvenated. The Queen had cast off her scintillant robe. We'd shared wine whose savor no words of a waking man could describe, along with a never-before-heard music from somewhere, which had thrilled me to the quick. More: sentences had passed my lips and hers, so eloquent that it may have been their very splendor, whose particulars would instantly vanish, that brought me back to consciousness with a thud.

I was bereft, right enough. I recalled routine of a vastly different sort from what had upheld me for a week. Work would await me on rising, my bladder full, my fat clock clucking, my arms and legs sheathed in crepe-like skin, my car in the drive like a listless, wallowing hog. That's the sort of day—everybody has one, at least now and again, especially perhaps on the job—when nothing appears to matter, nothing, even when I have prospects awaiting that aren't all bad, that may even look stimulating. They're not

enough. Or at least they weren't enough anymore at the river, even though hordes of the same trout were feeding on the same lucent insects, the air was crystalline, and my blue cup was ready to be filled again. And no matter that pink Mars, when it showed after dark, seemed to blink at me alone through a notch in the Wind River Mountains; or that I heard a cougar's screech echoing in a coulee before blending with coyotes' howls, a unified, wild melody filling the countryside. No, no matter. Things were not enough anymore.

So my adventure's conclusion ended in dismay, to put it gently—which has endured. There'd be no further easy confluence of things, blood coursing through my body like the water itself, bright birds and animals and I in a wondrous, mixed dominion. All gone. Now I'd see a thing and my mind would tear from it to something it suggested. I was too painfully aware that the simple, unwilled sense of grand coherence had been sacrificed to my old inclination: once again, I was *laboring* to forge wholes out of disparities. The habit had recurred like a sickness from which I was confident I had recovered.

Owing to my brooding, I missed a dozen strikes. Trout spat my flies before I noticed they'd sucked them in. My curses were all but wordless as they caromed off the rocky shelves. I repented, swore again, swore more loudly, and repented again, not because of any doctrinal urge but because my words had troubled the flow of the air through high passes, the sun through my skin, the water through roaring rapids downstream, the fish through slicks and riffles. On the other hand, why not disrupt all that? It was unavailable now in any case.

I found ample grounds to keep cursing—at an osprey, of all things, as it stooped on a whitefish, and I persisted as it struggled to get the prey airborne. I resented the bird for having insufficiently moved me.

Oh so stirring, I snarled to myself.

I was, Lord knows, no fisher of men, but my physical situation seemed to push me in a Scriptural direction. I thought of a passage that has sporadically snared my attention since my teens: *Now the news of a higher kingdom is preached and everyone enters it violently.* Yes, it must have actually been stirring for Andrew, Simon Peter, and all the other fishermen that the advent they'd been waiting for, even if unknowingly, now broke

into their lives! Or did they break into it? As in so much of the Bible, there's an acutely ambiguous ring to these words.

Now a great trout, a rainbow, didn't so much break as *explode* into my own life, and I snapped my leader in reaction. This provoked further angry clamor from me, loud enough that I flushed a hare from hiding in nearby brush. I watched its random yawing, leftward, rightward. Almost comical, that manic weaving.

The hare's jagged path had a motive. That quick animal knew it was far more vulnerable to a raptor if it followed an unvarying path. I envisioned steely talons fanned, the predator's eyes beads of heat, cruel and keen. Again, I loathed that old impulse to appropriate some kind of meaning for myself to what I'd seen, no matter how contrived. Each thought I had in that instant became a precipitous turn from what had prevailed in these late days. My yen for significance felt overwhelming.

Come nightfall, a hot wind blew in from the easterly desert and met the prevailing chill of the mountains. Hard rain came on. My small tent's canvas trapped the dampness and made me sweat, and each time sweat woke me, I'd lament the absence of those blue-white stars and planets, scattered from pole to pole. Or rather, I'd lament what had been my response to them, which seemed so beyond me.

River fog stayed on until about noon next day, or so my hunger implied. I wore no watch. In due course, the fog lifted and the sky returned to caerulean. For all of that, I was done. I knew I'd never return, because my longing to save what I'd known earlier on that trip would be self-conscious and therefore self-defeating. I struck the tent, packed up my grip, all but the cup, because I meant to taste my river one last time.

My sweet gone river.

Hunkered on a beach I'd used from time to time for a midday nap, I gazed at a spot where the current broke over ledge. A face appeared in the rapids. At first I assumed it was my own image, but I knew there couldn't be so clear a reflection from moving water, and the angle was all wrong. The eyes in that face darted back and forth across my own face, as if to watch this intrusive angler from all points of view. Hair fanned around the countenance in the water like some dark nimbus.

I flung my blue cup at the apparition, for some reason imagining the taste of flesh and blood. The cup washed away. I heaved myself from the sand, afraid to stay any

longer. I tore from the beach, with only my rod in hand. *Tore* is the word, exactly: I thought I heard an actual ripping sound.

On my way to the village, I sought to drag my thoughts back down to earth. A mind can deceive, I knew, perhaps especially on what's called vacation, a suspension of routine. Surely, I figured, what I saw was a phantasm. Had it somehow been spurred by the old goad of duty, of obligation, the welling up in my soul of an inscrutable urge to rise from what lay capaciously before me?

I felt foolish but also curiously bent on spreading my news, which did feel violent. I burst into the old man's store, all breathless, and asked its laconic owner, "Have you seen him? Have you seen John the Baptist?"

The old man's eyes looked into mine: "When you did," he answered.

A former Pulitzer finalist in poetry, Sydney Lea served as founding editor of *New England Review* and was Vermont's Poet Laureate from 2011 to 2015. In 2021, he was presented with his home state's Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts. He has published twenty-four books: a novel, five volumes of personal and three of critical essays, and sixteen poetry collections, most recently *What Shines* (Four Way Books, NYC, 2023). His sixth book of personal essays, *Such Dancing as We Can* and his second novel, Now *Look*, were published in 2024.

Care Less

by Sarah DeParis

The panic rose in my chest. My heart pounded. I felt sweaty, dizzy, and utterly out of control. A palpable cloud of despair made the air feel thick and oppressive. I couldn't breathe. I was vaguely aware of the chilly northern California February air, the fog that hung low, the faint smell of leather and almost-new-car. I was above myself looking down: a shiny blue sedan parked outside a hospital, a small woman sitting in the driver's seat, white-knuckled hands clasped on the steering wheel like a life raft, forehead pressed against her hands as if bowed in prayer, shoulders heaving. The words rose as a deafening roar in my head: *I can't do this anymore*. I tried desperately to battle the words down, to stuff them back into whatever hole they came from like a towel shoved into a drain. It was a Friday morning, 7 a.m., and I had five surgeries to perform that day.

But the more I pushed the words down, the louder the roar became. Then, the roar became images: terrifying flashes of a gruesome car accident, a bottle of pills, a gun. They were intrusive and foreign and shocking but accompanied by a sense of relief, enticing and sweet.

Desperate to continue to take care of my patients, to not disappoint them, or my boss, or my staff, I steadied myself, shuddered, and began to breathe. I opened the car door and swung my legs out jerkily, like a marionette. I willed myself to stand, willed myself to take one step, then another. I walked from the parking lot to the hospital entrance, vaguely aware of the other human shapes in scrubs filing in the same direction towards the door. A smile pasted itself to my face, my shoulders straightened, a switch flipped: I was a surgeon again.

I'd been an attending surgeon for three years, and I was taking three different psychiatric medications to be able to sleep and go to work. Five years of untreated depression and anxiety during my residency and fellowship had taken its toll. A surge in demand for surgery due to delayed care from COVID had doubled my surgical volume—I was now operating four days a week instead of two. My stress level was seismic. I had stopped sleeping, this time not due to the constant shrill beep of a pager, but due to

nightmares that triggered my mind to spin about work scenarios until the early hours of the morning. My complex eyelid reconstruction would fail, leaving behind an exposed, vulnerable eye. My young patient with an aggressive eye socket cancer would lose not just her eye, but a large part of her face. The compounding anxiety and insomnia were an avalanche, obliterating my mental health until I reached the point of a panic attack in the hospital parking lot.

I'm a doctor who truly cares about my patients, which means I carry the stress of my inherently stressful job everywhere I go. My husband Francesco often urges me to relax and let loose—but I am always on call, which always places me on edge. Over the years, I've been called a "superfeeler" (my therapist's term), an empath, highly sensitive, too emotional. My hidden softness has always made me feel a little bit like an alien ever since I was a small child. I carried a secret inside that no one else seemed to notice: *the world is pain.*

One Sunday when I was ten years old, I sought comfort from my mother. She was in the kitchen cooking meals for the week that she would not have time to prepare between working twelve-hour days as an attorney. I approached her and confided that I felt sad, but I didn't have the words to articulate why.

"You have no reason to be sad," she replied, rolling her eyes in frustration. "Look around you and cheer up." I had been hoping for a hug and a comforting word, but there were dinners to be made, and she wasn't wrong: I never wanted for anything in my childhood. Nevertheless, surrounded by family and all I could need, I walked away feeling alone.

I arrived at the surgical preoperative area that February morning with lingering wispy remainders of my panic attack and a deep feeling of emptiness. Everything was as usual: nurses walked briskly across the linoleum floor, fluorescent lighting cast an artificial glow on the rows of narrow cots divided by curtains, thin and flimsy. I entered the locker room, changed my clothes. A robot in scrubs.

I approached my first patient of the morning, Ms. B, and began to review the planned procedure—a routine eyelid surgery called a blepharoplasty—where I would remove excess skin that was weighing down the eyelids. A few weeks earlier, I'd spent

painstaking time with her in my clinic, explaining the procedure in detail and answering all her questions. Ms. B, a recent retiree originally from Ohio, had seemed confident and eager to proceed.

I launched into my typical speech—bruising, swelling, ointment for the eyelids, medication for pain. A few minutes into my monologue, I noticed that Ms. B would not meet my eyes. Hers were downcast, fingers picking nervously at the edge of the white cotton hospital sheets.

I felt impatience rising in my chest and the swirling emotions of the morning bubbling just beneath the surface of my professional veneer. My usual abundant patience was absent. “Ms. B, do you understand? Does this sound familiar to you?”

“No, I don’t remember any of this, and it sounds very overwhelming. I’m not sure why I’m having this surgery.”

I struggled to keep the edge from my voice. “Do you remember what we talked about in the office—that the purpose of the surgery is to improve your vision?”

“No.” Her eyes looked down, across the room, anywhere but at me.

I let out an exasperated sigh. “Ms. B, we don’t have to proceed with the surgery today if you’re feeling unsure.”

“Let’s just do it,” she responded halfheartedly.

I glanced at the clock: 7:50 a.m. The surgical nurses and the anesthesiologist followed my eyes pointedly. We were already twenty minutes late. I could feel the wasted minutes in my bones, the rest of the day’s work stacking up behind me. I could see the subsequent patients who would be informed we were running behind, who would snap at me and my staff in response.

I made a decision: fuck it. Instead of turning on my heel and marching to the operating room as I was expected to do, I walked to the neighboring workstation and grabbed a chair. All eyes in the room were on me as I strode across the linoleum, chair bouncing loudly as I rolled it behind me and positioned it next to Ms. B’s bedside. I sat, took a breath, took her hand in mine, and waited until her eyes met mine.

“Ms. B, I’m sensing there’s something else going on. Are you okay?”

She hesitated before responding. “My brother died last week. I’m still grieving and I’m not sure if I’m ready to go through with a procedure today.”

I felt my frustration and impatience melt into empathy. I let out the breath I had not realized I was holding. I squeezed her hand, rubbed her shoulder. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, doctor.” Her reply was almost a whisper.

I was under constant pressure to fill my surgery days to the brim, and unless it was medically unsafe to proceed, I rarely cancelled. But perhaps humanity was more important than operating room quotas.

“It’s okay not to be ready. Go home and take care of yourself. The surgery and the operating room will be here for you whenever you decide you are ready.” This time, there was genuine compassion in my voice.

As she relinquished the weight she had been carrying, Ms. B’s shoulders dropped, and she began to cry. She finally met my gaze again. “Thank you, doctor. I’m so relieved. I didn’t want to do this today, but I was afraid to tell you.” She stood up from the bed, shakily, but purposefully, and the nurses brought her belongings. She looked back over her shoulder and waved to me as she left, genuine gratitude written on her face.

At that moment, something shifted in me, too. A dawning realization: I am not Marionette, Robot, or Surgeon. I am Human. The words I had spoken to Ms. B were also what I needed for myself.

That evening, I gathered Francesco, our dog Chloe, and my favorite fleece throw blanket onto my couch. Francesco and I met when I was in medical school, and although he is not a medical professional, he had lived my experiences alongside me for a decade. He held my hand, silently encouraging me.

I unlocked my cell phone shakily and dialed my boss. I told him everything: the anxiety, the depression, the insomnia that I could no longer bear. I needed to be off work. I needed to not be on call. I needed help. I’d put smashed faces back together and watched people die, but this vulnerable admission was one of the most terrifying moments of my life.

I was met with a long, uncomfortable, silence. As the seconds stretched on and felt like hours, a tidal wave of shame and panic flooded my body. Francesco held my gaze with compassionate eyes, holding me steady.

My boss broke the silence abruptly. “You really need to learn how to care less about your patients.”

The moment screeched to a halt like a record scratch. Through my tears, I was suddenly aware of the absurdity of his response. He offered a solution—not a mental health break, not a referral to a psychiatrist, and not an iota of empathy for my despair. His solution: care less.

How undeniably, Earth-shatteringly, gut-wrenchingly sad.

“I’m so sorry, but I can’t go on like this.” My voice broke, a muffled sob escaping before I could smother it.

“Well, now I’m worried you’re going to hurt yourself. You should really see a doctor.”

A second wave of shame made me feel like I wanted to crawl into a hole in the ground. Then, I thought of Ms. B: Human first, then patient. Human first, then doctor. I steeled myself, straightened my shoulders, and answered with the truth. “I do have a doctor. I spoke to her today, and she says I need to be off work for three months.”

Another long pause ensued. I wanted to die. “Well, I don’t know what to do about this. You’re supposed to be on call, and I can’t cover for you. You’ll need to keep your pager on and continue answering it until I can figure this out.”

And then he hung up. My face was hot and my stomach in knots as I sunk into a deeper despair. I had a duty to my hospital, my colleagues, and my patients, and for the first time in my life, I had failed to meet it. Francesco enveloped me in a hug and Chloe licked the tears from my face.

A few hours later, I received a text from my boss letting me know I could forward my pager to his. That was the last time I ever heard from him. If there was any sense of relief at that moment, I could not feel it—I was buried under a giant shit-pile of shame. It would take me many months to excavate myself.

I was unhappy to my core in my role as a surgeon, but decades of cultural programming would not allow me to acknowledge that. My body had thrown up various methods of protest that had grown louder and louder over the years: chronic pain, lingering viral illnesses, depression, anxiety, insomnia. Finally, the protest reached a fever pitch that could no longer be ignored in the form of a panic attack in the hospital parking

lot. The irony is—I'm the type of doctor you would probably want. I've cared very deeply about every patient who has walked through my door. I was good at my job.

My boss's advice may sound absurd—look for one patient in the history of medicine who wants a doctor who does not give a shit, and you'd be hard pressed to find one. It may be tempting to blame this on him: *What terrible advice! What a jerk!* But that would be a mistake. Caring less is a coping strategy that many healthcare providers learn as a way to compartmentalize their stress and the difficult emotions that inevitably arise from their jobs. There is no time or safe space to process those emotions, so where do we put them? I cared so much that I was drowning, medications and therapy doing little to keep me afloat. In this context, to keep performing the way I was expected to, perhaps my boss's advice was not so far off the mark.

Our current medical system does not offer the resources, time, or support to allow for connected, emotionally healthy providers. Mental health care is stigmatized such that many providers are afraid to ask for help. The statistics tell the story: physicians have higher rates of burnout, depression, and suicide than the general population. Twenty-eight percent of residents experience a major depressive episode during training as compared to 7-8% of similarly aged people in the general population. Approximately 300-400 physicians die by suicide each year, and female physicians are particularly at risk, with rates of suicide 250-400% greater than women in other careers. Rates of burnout among healthcare workers have reached an all-time high, with nearly half of healthcare workers experiencing burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Psychotherapist and author Lori Gottlieb describes the metaphor of a prisoner violently shaking the bars of their cell, desperate for escape, only to one day look to the left and right and realize that the prison cell has no walls. For many years, I could not see the exit door. One of the greatest gifts I've given myself since that morning in the hospital parking lot was the courage to look to the left and right and exercise my own autonomy. I chose not to follow my boss's advice. I wanted to care more, not less.

So, I took the hard road—I uprooted my career and left clinical care. I questioned my core beliefs, dissecting each one before deciding whether to keep it or throw it away. I excised what was making me sick. I started over. I am fortunate: I was able to walk away before my body's protest became one from which I could not return.

Sarah DeParis is a physician and surgeon who left clinical medicine after a long struggle with depression and anxiety. Her writing about this experience began as an all-consuming urge to understand and heal. In the end, she realized it was a story about shedding a deeply ingrained identity and starting over—a pervasive human experience. In her life after medicine, she has (re)discovered passions for animals, art, and creative writing. She is happiest when snuggling her dogs, riding her horse, or spending time with her people.

Time

by David Riessen

Before our beautiful son Sam was born, there was no Sam. That makes sense. Or does it? And after Sam died, we go back to no Sam? Do we? No, definitely not. Time is all messed up, and before and after might not exist beyond our own convoluted, subjective perceptions.

When Sam was about three, he had a science fiction view of how the world works. If something bad happened, he would cry out for us to bend the immutable laws of physics.

“Make it today again! Please, Mommy, make it today again!”

At first, we didn’t know what he meant. Obviously, he was unhappy about the dropped ice cream cone or boo-boo on his skinned knee or whatever the calamity was. But what does “make it today again” mean? And then Debi figured out that he wanted us to literally erase the disastrous event and start the day over again. Sam believed in time travel. It’s a weird concept for a toddler to come up with on his own. It’s not like we were reading him *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a bedtime story.

But maybe it’s not so weird after all. The Block Universe Theory (which I know almost nothing about) posits that the past, present, and future all exist simultaneously. And as crazy as that sounds, it might account for how Doctor Strange is able to see 14,000,605 possible futures. He isn’t seeing something that hasn’t yet happened, he is just tapped more deeply into the fullness of the space-time continuum. The truth is I haven’t seen the movie, but I’m sure Benedict Cumberbatch is good. He’s always good, right?

Physicists tell us that before the Big Bang, there was nothing. Nothing: no space, no time, no thing. But what does that mean? I can't wrap my mind around it because empty space is still a thing, and no time only makes sense in relation to some time. I used to think about stuff like this when I was a kid. These days, I seem to have resumed my search for answers I will never know. Well, "never" is a strong word, but I'm not holding my cosmic breath.

Debi and I got married at Mohonk Mountain House on September 12, 1982. Our first song at the reception was the classic "As Time Goes By."

You must remember this:
A kiss is just a kiss,
A sigh is just a sigh.
The fundamental things apply
As time goes by.

I used to love this song, but I don't love it so much anymore. Wanna know why?

1. Please don't tell me what I must remember. My memory sucks. Too much trauma and too much weed.

2. Although Debi and I still kiss, I have to admit that it's less often and with fewer tongues.

3. On the other hand, we do sigh a lot more.

4. What are those fundamental things? Parents are not supposed to outlive their kids. That seems pretty fucking fundamental to me.

5. As time goes by. I wish it went somewhere else.

When Debi was pregnant with Sam, she met with a psychic who said that in a previous lifetime, we had a son who died. But Debi was afraid at the time that the psychic was actually telling our fortune. Could either possibly be true? Maybe both? Does time mean anything?

All of this leaves me more than a little dazed and confused. I think that Plato said that all learning is remembering. And if that's true, then maybe three-year-old Sam is the

most learned person in the world. He knows that time travel is possible because he hasn't yet forgotten the mysteries of the universe. That sounds good, but then why can't I go back and warn twenty-four-year-old Sam about fentanyl?

I need to make it today again.

David Riessen has been writing plays, screenplays, novels, and TV scripts on and off since he was a teenager. In the wake of his son's sudden death, he has found a home in creative nonfiction and has recently written *Nothing Lasts Forever,* a collection of stories and essays about loss, grief, and life. Some of these stories are featured in *Defenestration, Bright Flash Literary Review, Moon Park Review, Cool Beans Lit,* and now here in *bioStories Magazine*. David lives in Larchmont, New York with his wife Debi and dog Raven.

Wichita: 2:28 a.m.

by Mark Lewandowski

While Pamala and I waited for the host, we scanned the restaurant for empty places. Even at this late hour Denny's was packed, mostly by youngish white couples like us wanting an early breakfast after the bars had closed. But just on the other side of the host station four tables had been pushed together to accommodate a large Black family. There were school-aged kids, and likely parents and grandparents. I assumed the booths behind them seated overflow members of the group, since one of the young girls occasionally looked back and laughed with a boy there. A cousin, perhaps? All were dressed to the nines: the men and boys in suits and ties, the women in full length dresses with the padded shoulders—a popular style in 1988—and the daughters and granddaughters with puffed sleeves on their bright yellow and red and blue dresses, hair pulled back with matching ribbons, legs and feet clad in white socks and blacked, buckled shoes polished to a glimmer. Were they returning from wedding?

Looking at them I felt like a slob: face pasty white from not only two months of reading and writing as a first-year graduate student, but before that three months sliming fish in Alaska. I wore cheap draw string pants from J.C. Penny's and a thread bare Grateful Dead t-shirt with soggy pits.

Pamala didn't seem to mind my appearance; at least she said nothing about it. We clasped hands and smiled at one another. Would our families travel to *our* wedding someday, I wondered? Or was the scene in front of us a far-flung future? Would we one day be the older couple in the center of the tables, brood in tow for a grand-niece's wedding?

A future of us together was likely a one-sided fantasy. Pamala was engaged to another, and when we met my first day in Wichita, she made no attempt to hide the ring from me. While we waited for our table at Denny's I wished the fiancé to see us, even though it was the middle of the night and he lived over a hundred miles away in Topeka. He would learn the truth then, and he'd walk away from this woman I loved and she would never have to make the choice between us.

Instead, two white guys came in. One wore a dirty baseball cap. The other had his car keys attached to a chain which linked to a belt loop. He swung the keys on the chain and caught them over and over again.

We continued to wait on the host. Too long, probably. But I wanted to stretch out this night, this feeling of being part of a normal couple doing normal couple things like waiting on a table without sniggering familiars wondering if she would ever come clean to her fiancé, or if I'd ever snap out of it and stop being such a sap. So we swayed our twined hands and laughed about the visiting writer who had bought a change of clothes to the club, swapping out his seer suckers for white linen around midnight. Man that guy could sweat. And he had been a Peace Corps volunteer in Haiti. How did he survive the heat?

Finally, the host spotted us, raised a finger and mouthed "One minute."

"Wait," one of the two guys behind us said. "Do you see this?"

"Holy shit!" the other shouted. "Look at all these fucking niggers!"

Her hand squeezed mine tighter.

Certainly the family in front of us heard that? The little girl who had been laughing with her cousin turned around and we locked eyes for a second before she went back to her pancakes.

"Jesus Christ. I can't eat with all these niggers in here!"

Now the man in the center of the table looked up, though he didn't stop chewing his food. Did he think I said it? Did the little girl next to him think so? Did either see the two guys behind us who had clearly come in after us?

I pulled Pamala towards the door, brushing past the two guys, and shouted, "And I'm not going to eat with rednecks!"

Outside, I then remembered that Pamala's Toyota was at the very back of the dark parking lot. Before we took five steps the door of the restaurant opened, and sure enough, here came the two guys, the one still swinging his keys. They stepped in behind us. We said nothing, just hurried our pace. Both men chuckled.

This is how it ends. In a Denny's parking lot at 2:30 in the morning.

Were they getting closer?

"Shit," I whispered.

When we got to the car, Pamala pulled away to open the driver's side. I finally turned around, knees shaking, to get between her and the two men. To do what? Something. Anything.

The men weren't there. Pamala unlocked the passenger side and I jumped in, banging my head on the door frame.

"That's them, I think," she said, looking through the rearview mirror. The reflection of their tail lights reddened her cheeks.

"We can go back," I said. Still whispering.

She shook her head.

"Is there a Perkins in Wichita?"

"I just want to go home," she said.

She kept her eyes on the rearview mirror and backed slowly out of the spot.

I felt myself sinking deeper into the passenger seat. My head dully throbbed. I couldn't remember ever feeling so impotent. Nine months later when Pamala ended our relationship I'd keep revisiting that night, wondering what I could have done differently, considered over and over the inanity of what I shouted out: *And I'm not going to eat with any rednecks...*

Was this the first clue that I didn't measure up? Was our relationship doomed after that?

I just had to make it about myself. Not about that big, beautiful family eating pancakes, the real target of the slurs.

As we left the Denny's parking lot I tried to spot them through the windows. The little girl especially. Had she heard me? Or did my sad little gesture, perhaps like the rants of the two guys, just fold into so much white noise?

Mark Lewandowski is the author of the story collection, *Halibut Rodeo*. His essays, stories, and scripts have appeared in many literary journals, including *The Gettysburg Review*, *The North American Review* and *The Florida Review*. In addition to numerous Best of the Net and Pushcart nominations, his work has been listed as "Notable" in *The Best American Essays*, *The Best American Travel Writing*, and *The Best American Nonrequired Writing*. He has taught English as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Poland and as a Fulbright Scholar in Lithuania. Currently, he a Professor of English at Indiana State University.

Two Truths and a Lie

by Sharman Ober-Reynolds

The arc of scientific discovery is long and bends slowly toward progress. Before “science,” the best physicians in England examined King George III’s poop and urine and blistered his back with heated cups. They tried strait jackets, arsenic-containing drugs, and soaking his feet in water and vinegar. Some of his doctors thought his illness resulted from wearing wet socks, eating peas, or “flying gout,” which flew to his brain from his painful feet. The King was psychotic, maybe from Porphyria; more likely, he had bipolar disorder and later dementia, and the battle for his mind was crude, frightening, and finally ridiculous.

We look back to the previous generations and wonder how they survived bleeding, animal dung ointments, or cannibal cures. Of course, many didn't. And our children and grandchildren will look back at us, shaking their heads at the horror of our ways. Things do change, but the increments are sometimes too small for us to notice. The strength of the scientific process is that people who have different ideas do experiments, transcend prior beliefs, and build a foundation of facts. And voila, we've progressed from poop examination to brain surgery. And, if science is allowed to follow this proven path, imagine what physicians practicing 250 years in the future will think about brain surgery.

The problem is there are lots of people who no longer believe in science.

My family learned this thirty-three years ago when our son was diagnosed with autism. Our love for him is as natural as breathing or dreaming, although we no longer dream of a time when he won't have autism. And that's okay. On most days, his happiness level hovers around an eight out of ten, and, of course, I'm happy he's happy. He is solidly built, with an open expression, and when he laughs, which is often, you can’t help but laugh along with him. His dark humor makes him good company. He is perceptive. When he was five, he was immediately aware that his grandmother, whom he visited twice a year, had painted her kitchen a different shade of white. He is a thinker. At six, he had his own theory about autism: his two younger blue-eyed brothers didn’t have it, so his brown

eyes must have been responsible. He is a hard worker and makes sure travel plans, minor illnesses, and major snowstorms don't interfere with his job as a courtesy clerk at a neighborhood grocery store.

The autism spectrum is expansive. Dr. Stephen Shore, an autism advocate who is on the spectrum, once said, "When you meet someone with autism, you've met one person with autism." Some on the autism spectrum, because of an accident of birth, a complicated interplay between genes and the environment, never utter a word, never learn to smile, never lift their eyes to another's face or lock with another's gaze. And, while our son sometimes talks when he shouldn't—how he really feels about birthday gifts, unpopular relatives, and a movie while still in the middle of the movie—for some with autism, communication with words or gestures is not possible or desired. Sometimes, our lives are not what we deserve but what is given, and we become what we are made to be.

When he was diagnosed, our world was rearranged. I changed jobs, hoping to bend science a little faster in autism research. Over the years, progress has been slow, one foot in front of another and then another, plodding and cautious. Yes, there have been advances, but also wild detours, like when Google Maps, because of faulty information, takes you to a dead end or, worse, off a cliff.

In the 1940s, children with autism were lobotomized for "living in fantasy worlds." Clearly, not all brain surgery represents progress. If our son had been born in the 1960s, when autism was thought to be a kind of schizophrenia, I would have been charged with bad mothering. The theory of "refrigerator mothers," as these women were labeled, emerged from a sort of pseudoscience confirmed by the general misogynist basis of the Freudian psychoanalytic idea in which the mother, alone, was viewed as the source of harm. These fraudulent claims injured mothers terribly and surely entered their souls. Mothers who'd given as much as any mother could give in their heartbreaking and endless maternal tasks were crushed and shamed for years. You do not tell a woman who is already distressed by her child's challenges and suffering that it is her fault. But that is just what psychiatrists did well into the 1970s.

While environmental, genetic, and biological causes of autism have been proposed, a complete understanding of its origin is fragmentary. In that void, disinformation has rushed in like toxic waste. So, without a good deal of skepticism, when we go online, instead of accessing *the* truth, we access *their* truth. Or the information superhighway takes us faster and farther in the direction we are already headed, confirming our preconceived notions and bad ideas. Emerson recognized that humans are “fickle creatures and easily misled,” anticipating, perhaps, confirmation bias, motivated reasoning, and social media algorithms. He provided a warning, "Most men (and women) have bound their eyes with one or another handkerchief and attached themselves to…communities of opinion."

For parents, an autism diagnosis feels like being run over by a truck. And then, it feels like being run over again when the truck, driven by deluded professionals and hucksters, backs up over you. In 1992, when our son was diagnosed, the medical community had moved on from Freudian pseudoscience. In its place, a strident, populist, antiscientific movement against vaccinations emerged. So-called “autism experts” online, some with credentials, some with a grudge, and some hoping to make a few bucks lectured me, confused me, bossed me about, and told me to yank out my mercury dental fillings, especially if I expected to have more children. Since our son clearly had autism before his two-year measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccination, we wondered how the mercury-based preservative in thimerosal caused his autism. There was a response to that, too, “Vaccines made his autism worse.” If you believe mercury causes autism, chelation is the next step. The next step after that was death for some children, when self-deceived practitioners “excised” heavy metal from their vulnerable bodies, like ridding them of evil spirits.

You may say, “Who would believe such a crazy thing?” It takes some effort. In Wonderland, Alice said, “There’s no use trying. One can’t believe impossible things.”

“I daresay you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes, I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

In Autism-land, we were encouraged to do the same, ignoring volumes of evidence in favor of flashes that meet the eye and hunches that seize the gut. A magic potion was

promoted. Unlike the shimmering blue one Alice drank, tasting of “cherry tart, custard, pineapple, roast turkey, toffee, and hot buttered toast,” this brew tasted like vitamins and was about $800 a month. We were told to try Facilitated Communication, a kind of Ouija Board that made it possible for non-verbal children to spell out their innermost thoughts, compose poetry, and sometimes accuse innocent parents, caregivers, and teachers of sexual abuse, always with the help of a “facilitator” blind to their own unconscious demons. Some autism experts swore by restricted diets. But if a child with autism eats only six white foods and the prescribed diet eliminates three of those foods, one of which is dairy, without medical supervision, some kids end up with fragile bones and fractures.

For $2000, our son could listen to filtered and modulated music. Auditory Integration Therapy (AIT) claimed to provide “very positive results for dyslexia and autism” and cure depression. Somehow, this made me very depressed. And angry. Kids with sound sensitivities so extreme that even glimpsing a Hoover sends them running into another room screaming often found the prescribed pitches painful. If weird music failed to "fix" our son, we could move on to hyperbaric oxygen chambers, which promised to correct the “low oxygen levels and inflammation” in his brain. The number of sessions needed would vary depending on our ability to pay for them. A research colleague told me, “The only way a hyperbaric oxygen chamber will help your son is if he gets applied behavior treatment while in the chamber.”

Because the media rewards outrage and outlandishness, unfounded and weird claims are given equal billing with careful research. And, once an unproven idea is spoken and cultivated, it takes on a life of its own. When fraudulent claims echo through the chambers of social media, they become contagious. In addition to pseudoscience, astonishing recoveries online prompted desperate parents to inject their children with blood cells and pour raw camel milk into their gluten-free cereal. And, on days when our son was not happy, and I wondered if he ever would be, I would surely have given him a snake oil-infused raw camel milkshake if I could only believe. But I couldn’t.

The easiest dollar a scammer ever makes is selling miraculous remedies to distraught parents. Sometimes, I tried reasoning with families burning through their savings or taking out a second mortgage to pay for yet another newfangled way to rescue their child from autism. Sure, there was no evidence, but the testimonials were terrific. I’d

look at them with an expression of solidarity and concern and say, “You know, if there were a cure for autism, Blue Cross would definitely cover it.” They would rearrange their bottoms in their seats and glance at me apologetically, helpless that they couldn’t do even more for their perfect children. And really, you can’t make people listen.

It’s still possible to access all these kooky treatments, but their popularity is waning. An avalanche of recent research has undermined bogus claims. It cost a fortune and took years, but it had to be done. Erroneous assumptions can persist for a long time, as King George’s physicians proved. After 7000 years, you'd think someone would have concluded that bleeding debilitated patients, some at death's door, was a bad idea. However, King George’s doctors clung to this theory dating back to Hippocrates, which proposed that imbalances in one of the four key humors—blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm—in the human body were responsible for physical and mental illnesses. But bad ideas are not humorous.

Now that parents are no longer advised to lobotomize their children as there were in the 1940s, have overcome the lingering shame of “refrigerator motherhood” expounded in the 1960s, and are emerging from the dangerous quackery of 1990s and beyond, there is a growing recognition that pharmaceutical companies have complicated motivations as well. A required course, *Fraud, Waste, and Abuse,* at the university where I’m employed asked the following question, “If a pharmaceutical company offers to compensate you for prescribing their products, you should: A. Accept, as this is a standard way to earn extra money. B. Decline. Federal healthcare programs cannot reward business referrals for reimbursement. C. Report the offer to Compliance Services, Office of General Counsel, or Risk Management. D. Both B and C.” The biggest lie we tell ourselves is that we aren’t influenced by “big money,” which we merely see as “effective advertising.”

I didn't work for Big Pharma for twenty years, but with them, coordinating clinical trials at a non-profit autism research center. Bringing a drug to the market requires a Herculean effort and a king’s ransom. In 2022, the average cost of developing a new drug was $2.3 billion over ten to fifteen years. The agency I worked for was a clinical site for one of the sixteen different secretin trials. This pancreatic hormone, which sounds like it could be classified as one of the body’s liquid humors, gained notoriety in 1998 when a

mother championed its effectiveness on two national television shows. Anecdotal reports claimed that secretin led to improvements in the behavior of autistic children because problems with the stomach and digestion interfered with their ability to learn. If digestive issues were managed, autistic children were "freed up' to focus on developing skills. But we didn't need sixteen clinical trials to disprove this theory, and the word secretin makes me think of a body fluid best not discussed in public.

Pharmaceutical companies will sometimes persist in conducting clinical trials with the same investigational medication despite all odds. There is a reason for this. When companies seek FDA approval to market a new drug, they submit all clinical trials they have sponsored to the agency. If two of those trials demonstrate that the drug is more effective than a placebo, which already has a seventy percent chance of showing improvement, the drug is generally approved. Companies may sponsor as many trials as they like. All they need are two positive ones. Drug companies make sure that positive drug trials are published in medical journals and that healthcare providers know about them. In contrast, negative drug trials usually languish unseen within the FDA, which regards them as proprietary and, therefore, confidential. Not surprisingly, this practice significantly biases the medical literature, medical education, and treatment decisions.

People with autism do live better “through chemistry," as the Dupont advertising slogan claims. While there are no drugs that treat the social and communication challenges, medications successfully treat many co-occurring conditions. My son takes a “drug cocktail” of two medications to treat generalized anxiety so he doesn’t “endlessly worry about everything,” which is what a cocktail is supposed to do. When he was an adolescent and taking public transportation across town, medication for his ADHD helped him remember to get off at the correct bus stop.

The scientific community has now determined that applied behavior analysis, or ABA, is the mainstay for autism treatment. ABA has passed tests on its usefulness, quality, and effectiveness and has been endorsed by the US Surgeon General and the American Psychological Association. Based on the science of learning and behavior, this strategy works on husbands, in-laws, co-workers, and dogs, as well as people with autism. Positive reinforcement is one of the main strategies used in ABA. Very simply, when a behavior is followed by something that is valued, a person is more likely to repeat

that behavior. For example, my dog and husband have trained one another. Our collie-poodle sits patiently in front of my husband at every meal. For a doggy grin, he rewards her with a stretchy, sunshiny bite of his cheese sandwich. If she stares at him long enough with her penny-colored begging eyes, he slips her a piece of savory-sweet chicken satay dipped in a velvety peanut sauce. No, we can't make people listen, but whether we intend to or not, we prompt, discourage, incentivize, guide, embarrass, comfort, indoctrinate, evoke, instruct, and shape one another's behavior every day.

When our son needed more experience chatting comfortably and appropriately with his middle-school friends, his speech therapist arranged for him to eat lunch with a group of kind adolescent boys, which, believe it or not, is not an oxymoron. These boys, like most teenagers, lived on the boundary between hubris and the abyss, and this lunch-bunch social club provided a bit of healthy structure to their lives, too. We discovered that even fourteen-year-olds can bask in the ecstatic glow of altruism. We praised and thanked the therapist, and she received kudos from the school administration. My reward? Our son no longer ate alone.

Our homework was to watch *The Simpsons* and talk about recent episodes at the dinner table so our son would learn conversational starters at school. That, in itself, was rewarding. I was also recruited by the speech therapist to provide more tangible perks to the lunch group. Once a week, I would go to a slightly malodorous classroom at the middle school at noon and meet with my son and his chatting buddies. Backpacks would drop, and chairs would scrape on the linoleum floor while I set out litters of soda and greasy pepperoni pizza. While the kids ate slice after slice of the Super Supreme, I would suggest a couple of games. Two Truths and a Lie was a favorite. In this game, each student tried to trick everyone with three statements about themselves. Two of them must be true, and the third statement is a complete lie. After the reveals, sometimes the kids groaned, sometimes soda shot out of their noses, and sometimes, they would fall over laughing. We practiced this game at home, too, because deception, the ability to understand and manipulate false beliefs, is difficult for people with autism.

Really, understanding that people lie is an essential lesson for everyone. We caress the touch screens on our electronic devices and, with a few swipes, access one truth and two lies, sometimes three truths and one big lie, and sometimes, just alternative

facts. Rigorous skepticism, an ear primed to hear false notes, and the unflappable skill of cache-emptying on our electronic devices are evolutionary imperatives. When it comes to caring for our children, who has the energy, money, or a single moment to waste on bad ideas?

Sharman Ober-Reynolds was born in Los Angeles and completed a master's in fine arts at Arizona State University. She is the primary author of *The FRIEND Program for Creating Supportive Peer Networks for Students with Social Challenges, including Autism*. For over thirty years, she worked in health care as a family nurse practitioner, primarily in autism research. In 2023, she was the first-place recipient of the Olive Woolley Bert Awards. Sharman now lives and writes in an old house in Salt Lake City with her family and Cadoodle, Lizzie.

Meander Is a Noun

by Erin Hemme Froslie

1.

On an otherwise pleasant late October afternoon, my phone buzzes from a local breaking news alert. The news: A couple taking a Sunday stroll finds a grim discovery—a body near the Red River, north of Main Avenue in Fargo, not far from my home.

This is newsworthy, of course; the dead in public always are. Still, I barely glance at the alert and return to grading papers written by my first-year students. I find the event neither alarming nor particularly attention-grabbing. I've lived near this river for nearly twenty-five years. In my former career as a journalist, I listened to police scanners and scrambled out of the newsroom when tidbits like this crossed the airwaves. Bodies in the Red River are an occasional fact of life.

From my local newspaper in May 2009:

Brothers were fishing along the river Saturday evening when they discovered the body.

In August 2017:

Kayakers on the Red River made a grim discovery … reported finding a body-sized object wrapped in plastic in the river, hung up on a log near the 90th Avenue Northwest bridge.

From a local television broadcast in August 2022:

Juveniles discovered a body in the river around 12:30 P.M.

One of the news stories is accompanied by a photo of emergency workers huddled along the banks of the river. In the foreground, I can see exposed roots of the trees that grow along this part of the Red. The river's bends ensure that whatever drifts along the current slams into the bank and gets caught in these roots that dangle. Logs. Discarded shopping bags. One summer, they caught the casings of a bomb from World War II. Once a year or so, a body.

2.

To meander is a verb. It's what I do when I walk my dog, Murphy. Snout to ground, he follows the scents of the other neighborhood dogs and these trails swerve from boulevard to lawn to fire hydrant to tree. I try to keep up. Meander is what my mind does in the middle of the night when I wake up with worry and nothing makes sense: Is there yogurt in the fridge for breakfast? Am I being fair to my student with anxiety? Maybe I should find a job at Starbucks?

The word meander suggests movement that is aimless, drifting, and rambling. It implies an uncertain destination. When I am feeling poetic, I imagine timeless, romantic strolls through the countryside. Sunny and warm, of course. A hint of lavender in the air as a gentle breeze tickles the tops of tall grasses. I imagine flowing skirts and oversized straw hats. Maybe a beach.

A geologist explains meander to me this way: it's a series of regular sinuous curves in the channel of a river or other watercourse. A meandering stream has a single channel that winds snakelike through its valley. I jot down these phrases to make sure I get it right. In the end I describe it like this: meandering is when the distance "as the stream flows" is greater than "as the crow flies."

Another significant detail about meanders is that they are more common and dramatic on flat land. Streams that tumble down mountainsides are controlled by the valleys they carve, their courses set in literal stone. On the plains, however, rivers establish their own possibilities.

My personal experiences with meandering don't include water at all. Meandering is the memory of Sunday afternoon drives with my parents. They pile me and my two younger brothers into a maroon van—there's no longer room for all of us on the bench seat of our red Chevy pickup truck. My father rolls down his window and we drive the gravel roads that surround our southwestern Minnesota farm. Slowly. My father's left elbow balances on top of the open window while he keeps an eye on both the road ahead and the growing fields to the side. The clouds of dust that follow us can be seen for a mile or so. For my farmer father, this routine is gossip, a way to stay abreast of the work of our neighbors. Whose corn is ready to tassel? Whose soybean fields are riddled with cockleburs?

I am quickly bored with this seeming lack of direction, this lack of purpose. For a while I stare out the window but I can't read the language my dad knows intuitively. Where he sees hay damaged by hail, I see only an ocean of pale-colored grass. Where he sees a year's worth of income, I see endless rows of jade.

I return to the Trixie Belden mystery novel I've brought along to read. I have more patience for the meanderings and meddling tendencies of youthful sleuths than I do for my own family. I find comfort in the ongoing tale of a teenage girl with annoying big brothers and a gorgeous best friend—nicknamed Honey!—who lives next door. Her home in the Hudson River Valley of New York is so different from my own but I recognize the main character's need to seek out mystery, her desire to escape the monotony of a sleepy rural existence. As I read, a blast of air from my dad's open window whips my long hair in front of my eyes, into my mouth. I try to tuck strands behind my ears, but they don't stay.

By now, my brothers have begun to pick fights with each other, their version of entertainment. I am still hopeful my parents will take us out for ice cream in one of the local towns or maybe pizza in Sioux Falls. No matter how far or long we wander, we always return home. And for me, this circular journey is more interesting than never having left at all.

A lifetime later, when I live in a different place near a river, I walk its trails and stop on a bridge over its channel. I look through chain link fencing to the flowing water below. From this perspective, the water river looks peaceful. But I know that appearance is deceiving. Over time, a small disturbance—a log, for example—can cause a meander to expand sideways and slightly downstream. The velocity of the stream shifts toward the outside of the bend, causing erosion on the outer bank. Meanwhile, the inside of the meander collects deposits of sediment, sand. Every meandering river is, in reality, the scene of a silent geological war. The water destroys and creates, it hides and reveals. The only certainty with a river is that while its course may meander, the water that flows through its channel never returns.

3.

Near the Red River, a body was found. A body was found near the Red River, north of Main Avenue in Fargo. A body of a 32-year-old man was found near the Red River,

north of Main Avenue in Fargo. It turns out, no matter how many different ways I twist and turn that phrase or think about it, it all leads to the same ending. The body of a 32-year-old man with no permanent address was found near the Red River, north of Main Avenue in Fargo.

Months from this moment, three men will be arrested, charged, and found guilty for killing this man. Court documents will say one man repeatedly stabbed the victim with a knife while another held him down. The victim was able to get away but collapsed near the river shore. The murder is violent and senseless and horrible, as all murders are.

But before the charges and the trial and the ongoing headlines, investigators identify the 32-year-old. His name: Philip Dewey Bergquist.

It took me a few days, but I recognize this name.

And it's at this point I pay attention. This is the moment the narrative changes direction, and the news becomes more than noise.

4.

There's a one-room log cabin less than a three-minute walk from my house. It is rustic and old. To get to it I head down a sidewalk covered in colorful chalk art drawn by the neighborhood kids and then past a home with an apple tree in its front yard. Tucked behind a row of twin homes, where asphalt meets the soft ground of woods, I can see the outline of the cabin. From this angle it looks like a shed, a place where you'd store a snow blower or lawn mower.

I didn't know it had a name until my neighbor told me. Later, I learn the dwelling is owned by the local historical society. It is the oldest original structure in my city and is named for the Swedish immigrant who built it, John G. Bergquist. In the summer months, it blends into the vegetation and in the winter months, the weathered oak boards are difficult to distinguish from the bark of the willows and elm and cottonwood that grow nearby. The Bergquist cabin is located on a small strip of urban wilderness, a slice of public easements that separate the river from the housing developments that have built up around it. Deer often congregate at this site. I like to see them here, in nature, more so than in our backyard munching on landscaping. In the winter, I watch these creatures paw through banks of snow outside this former dwelling, their hides an extension of the

cabin's exterior palette. All browns and grays, a sharp contrast against the white drifts. A scene you might find on a Christmas card.

5.

A few months before the news alert about a body in the Red River lights up my phone, I am pulling weeds from my front-yard garden when I see my neighbor Gwen—the one who knows the name of the Bergquist cabin—step out of her garage. She is exactly the kind of person I want to live next door. She knows all the neighborhood news and we occasionally swap recent book titles we've read. I borrow her large crockpot at least once a year so I can feed my now teen-aged kids and their friends during theatre dress rehearsal weeks. She offers me the perfect balance of gossip and help.

We solidified our friendship when my twin daughters were born. Gwen and her husband, both close to retirement at the time, offered to help. My husband was teaching an evening class once a week, so I was grateful for the extra hands. They entertained my preschool-aged son while I bathed babies. They rocked and fed babies, so I could tuck in my eldest. In the years since, they have attended Sunday school programs and purchased coupon books to support my kids' activities. We exchanged a set of house keys and once a week, they walk my dog.

I stand up, brush the soil off my knees, and give a friendly half-wave to Gwen. She comes over. "Say, I've got something to tell you," she says.

She launches into a story about how the day before she took her daily walk. A few years ago, the city rebuilt concrete trails along the river. The busiest street through our neighborhood is a designated bike lane for recreational cyclists, runners, and walkers who cross floating bridges and a former toll bridge to paths on the other side of the river. Gwen and her husband regularly stroll these paths, and I occasionally am the audience for tales from their neighborhood adventures.

Gwen tells me she was walking alone and on her return home, she paused for a moment to admire the Bergquist cabin. As she stood there, she noticed a tall, thin, middle-aged man walking along the path. She describes him as scruffy—unshaven and disheveled. He wore a large backpack.

"I thought he'd keep walking," Gwen says. "But then he came right up to me."

“You’re kidding,” I say.

My outward response does not reflect the internal anxiety I feel building. I’m no longer paying attention to the sweat dripping down my back. My chest begins to tighten. Gwen is in her 70s; she is a fierce but small woman whose nickname is “Ginger.” Even though I know her story ends well—she’s here, telling it—my mind begins to imagine all the horrible could-have-been, might-have-been scenarios. As much as I appreciate living near the river, its bends and underbrush offer respite for those who can’t or don’t want to stay in one of the community homeless shelters. Occasionally, I’ll see a tent set up or the remnants of a campfire between trees in the floodplain. Men wearing backpacks or carrying shopping bags occasionally wander through our neighborhood. I never feel unsafe walking along the river in daylight. But the thought of my neighbor approached by a strange man leaves me unsettled. It’s unfair and I know it, but I assume the man is homeless. And because I assume he doesn’t have a home, I am suspicious of his motives. What if he were drunk? High? Violent?

I am ready to lecture Gwen about how she should’ve immediately left the site when she tells me the man was friendly, charming even. “Have you ever been in there?” he asked her, nodding toward the Bergquist cabin. Gwen acknowledged she had—she is a sucker for Scandinavian history—and they briefly chatted about its charm. Then the man held out his hand for Gwen to shake. As Gwen remembered it, he introduced himself as Petey and then declared without any irony: “This is my cabin.”

The look on my face must reveal my concern and Gwen responds without me asking the question. “I wasn’t scared,” she assures me. That said, she was nervous enough to glance over to the nearby playground where two adults were watching their children play. If she felt in danger, she tells me, she could’ve shouted to them. After a few more friendly exchanges, Petey politely announced he needed to go.

“I was going to leave too, but then I saw him set his backpack down. He reached into his bag and pulled out a …” Gwen pauses for dramatic effect, and it works. I am imagining all the possible ways one could fill the silence. A knife? A gun? A snake?

“He pulled out a bolt cutter,” she says.

“A bolt cutter?” I repeat her words to make sure I’ve heard correctly. If I had an assumption about where this story is going, it no longer exists.

“Yep. He pulled out a bolt cutter, tossed his backpack over a shoulder, and walked over to the cabin. Then he used the bolt cutter to snip the padlock off the door.”

I stare at her. I am so shocked I can’t make sense of what she has said. A strange man has a conversation with my neighbor. He insists the historic cabin in our neighborhood is his. He has a bolt cutter in his backpack. He breaks the lock off the door. I hear the words Gwen said, but I don’t understand what just happened. Why did this man have a bolt cutter? How did it fit in the backpack? Why’s he breaking into a cabin with no valuables inside? Is he still there? Should we call the police? Why didn’t Gwen call the police?

“What happened next? What did you do?”

Gwen looks directly at me: “He walked inside and shut the door behind him. I came home.”

I think about this story a few weeks later when I read about Phillip Bergquist’s death in the local newspaper, when I read that his family and friends called him P.D. It took me a couple days to put all the pieces together. As soon as I did, I texted Gwen. She had come to the same conclusion. Petey didn’t break into the cabin. Phillip “P.D.” Bergquist did.

It takes me longer to come to another conclusion. The cabin is his.

6.

Meander is a noun, too.

One afternoon I pull up Google Earth on my computer so I can follow the path of the Red River. I’m curious if it meanders as much as I think it does. From an aerial view, I trace my cursor along the river corridor. There are places along its 550-mile journey where it bends gently. But as this northern river flows into the metro area of Fargo-Moorhead, I see where it twists so tightly it nearly forms a closed loop. This winding path or course is the meander, the noun. It is where the river makes a U-turn and changes direction. It explains, among other things, why some of the roads where I live become unexpected dead ends; why they turn in the most unlikely places. For a community built on the flat grid of the open plains, this unpredictability is jarring.

I play with the zoom feature to bring the river into focus. It's another way of understanding this feature that influences so much of my life, from the taxes I pay to the fears I have each spring when the snow melts. Close up I see a calm lane of water flanked by rows of trees and, further inland, wide open park spaces. This looks like prime waterfront property. If I zoom out far enough, my perspective changes. In this zone the river looks like something my children drew when they were in preschool. Although it's been years since they were that little, I can picture them sitting at our kitchen table, grabbing a crayon and scribbling a story down the middle of a blank page. Like their creations, this river corridor seems spontaneous and intentional at the same time. It has a story, but sometimes it's a difficult one to comprehend.

In my search for a more moderate aerial view of the river, I center the digital map so my entire neighborhood fills the computer screen. I identify my house—it's the only one with a rust-colored roof—and follow the street as it jogs south, then east, then south again into Homestead Park where the Bergquist cabin stands. From this perspective, it is easy to see the meanders. I'm not a limnologist, but I count four on the screen. One is so abrupt the land juts out into the river in the shape of a triangle. This spot is along the river trails and there's a sitting bench there. It's a place to relax when I need to be by myself. It's removed from the bustle of the city around me and if I close my eyes I can almost imagine that I am bathed in the quiet of my rural upbringing. The blackbirds and crows sound the same. When I open my eyes and look across the river, I watch the water from upstream flow past me and head north to its destination. Without moving, I watch the past flow into the future. Here I can imagine my own past, present, and future all at the same time.

7.

Most of what I know about the Bergquist cabin's history I learn from a sign posted near its location. A few years ago, our city park board completed a concrete bike trail that follows the dips and curves of the Red River banks. It's part of a long-term plan to make the river more public, more accessible. One segment of this trail begins where the Bergquist cabin stands and this entire area—the cabin, the path, the playground—is now named Homestead Park. From a posted description, I read that more than 150 years ago

an immigrant cut oak trees on the west banks of the Red River and skidded the logs across frozen water with rented oxen. This young homesteader, recently launched from the old ground of Sweden, the country of his birth, was determined to make his mark. He moved to the Red River Valley on the promise of the Homestead Act and completed all the necessary requirements. He built a one-room shelter, tilled the land for a few years, and the U.S. government handed him a deed to the property.

In the 1970s, some of Bergquist's descendants—including his son, Jim, and a grandson who was a local news weatherman celebrity—restored the cabin to its original form.

One challenge with refurbishing this particular piece of history, however, is the Bergquist cabin isn't easily visible from well-traveled roads. It can't be seen from the river. Its seclusion provides some peace from the bustling neighborhood around it, but it has made it the target of vandalism and illegal activities over the years. One summer a board member of the county's historical society wrote a letter to the editor in our local newspaper thanking concerned residents who called about suspicious activities taking place at the historic dwelling. The letter writer noted that "n'er-do-wells were found hiding their vehicles on the property, which is sheltered from the road by a row of bushes. Needless to say, we appreciate the tipsters calling police and letting us know." The board voted to use chains and padlocks to keep the "n'er-do-wells" away.

This explains why P.D. Bergquist needed a bolt cutter. It was locked. It also doesn't explain why he needed one. Why did he want to break in, in the first place?

8.

In the weeks after P.D.'s death, local media pursue all the possible angles to his story. They interview his parents. They try to interview the mother of his child but she declines. I follow the headlines diligently because I'm curious and it now feels more personal.

I learn from news reports that P.D. had a job and a home in Wisconsin, but a few months before his body was found in the Red River he moved to the Fargo-Moorhead area. His mother tells the newspaper that her son moved to be closer to his family's

history. His late grandparents lived in the area and his great-great grandfather was John G. Bergquist.

P.D. never rented an apartment or searched for a job. He tossed everything of importance to him in a bag. His homelessness was due, in part, to his struggles with mental health, his parents said.

This offers context for what I learn next. One spring night—six months prior to his death—P.D. did exactly what Gwen observed later that summer: he used a bolt cutter to remove the padlock on the door of the Bergquist cabin. Authorities were alerted and removed him from the cabin. They booked him in the county jail near the courthouse, a few blocks away from where he was arrested. He was charged with a felony for the possession of burglary tools and misdemeanors for trespassing and damaging property.

But what makes my heart break is when I read, again, that P.D. claimed the cabin was his. He wasn't belligerent, but he insisted he was protecting what belonged to his family, what belonged to him.

P.D.'s father is quoted in the newspaper as saying his son was embarrassed about the incident. "I think he honestly thought it was okay for him to be there and stay there because it had our last name on the front," he says.

P.D. was released from jail a few days later after a court hearing. The felony charge was dismissed during the summer, the two misdemeanors following his death.

Over the coming weeks, this is the story of P.D. I am drawn to. His death is violent and senseless and newsworthy. I follow the headlines; I request the police reports and court documents. But the question that wakes me up in more than one night: why did P.D. insist on coming back to the cabin his ancestor built?

His family assumes he turned to the cabin because it's a place his family visited often while he was growing up. P.D. spent many nights sleeping under bridges when he first got to Fargo, his father said, adding he used to worry about what his son would do come winter, knowing how cold it gets. "He just thought (the cabin) was his place to go … and I can't blame him, he'd been homeless for a while," Paul Bergquist tells the media. "Any port in a storm."

I accept this on the surface. Yes, of course, the cabin offered security and comfort. But I wonder if P.D. was looking for something else, a past he couldn't recreate.

9.

When I think back on my own childhood, it's the memories of mundane moments that most make me nostalgic for what used to be. It's the spontaneous coffee hours when relatives dropped by unannounced. It's swinging on a swing set my father built and singing *Jesus, Jesus, Jesus in the Morning* at the top of my lungs as my toes pointed to the sky. Some of these moments I left by choice, others were lost to an inevitable symptom of growing up.

When I was young, I only imagined leaving my sleepy rural existence. Getting out meant success; staying meant comfort. Like a meander that confuses, in some ways I did both and neither. When I left home, I didn't travel far in distance but I did in experience and expectation. Like P.D., I often return to the site of my childhood. I am loyal and protective of it, but I also don't quite fit.

When my own children launch their lives, I wonder if they will recall hours spent at the playground across a small cul-de-sac from the Bergquist cabin. We start to visit it regularly the year my oldest child turned one. This is the perfect place for toddlers and then preschoolers to run around. The dead-end street that leads to both the playground and the Bergquist cabin ensures there is no car traffic to worry about. The wilderness set aside for flood control is quiet enough that you can hear frogs chirping from a nearby slough. Usually, the only threat of any kind is a flock of wild turkeys that wanders through our neighborhood. They also fly short distances, something I didn't know until I once called the local animal dispatch to assist a bird "stuck" in our crabapple tree. Once I counted twenty-two turkeys perched in the branches of a bare tree along the river. They looked like vultures and sounded like angry old women.

Turkeys or not, my children call this particular playground the "Purple Park" because the tall, spiral slide—the playground's defining feature—is constructed from plastic purple material. One of the favorite photos from my son's childhood was taken when he slid down it on his back. The fine strands of baby hair fly straight out of his head from the build up of static electricity. I display a framed copy of it in my office, forever preserving him in his chubby childhood.

It's at this park that I push my kids in swings and hold my breath while they climb the mock rock wall before, I swear, they are big enough and coordinated enough to do

so. I close my eyes and remind myself that this is how kids build strength and confidence and independence. They need to jump; I just can't bear to watch. I don't know how far they'll go. And I know even if the stay, it will never quite be the same.

Because home is always shifting and being re-defined. That is true for P.D.; that is true for my children; it is true for me.

10.

My dog Murphy and I are both anxious to get some fresh air. The temperature has finally warmed up after subzero temperatures for nearly a week, so we step outside during the golden hour before sunset to discover a western sky painted in pinks and purples. You never know what's coming.

This is true of prairie skies and meandering rivers.

We head toward the river and this route takes us by the Bergquist cabin. We haven't walked along this trail since winter settled in, and I glance at the structure to confirm the padlocks are secure and the doors are shut, to keep things out, to keep things in. I look to see if there's a shadow meandering along the inside walls. I can no longer walk by this cabin without thinking about the man who built it and the descendant who broke in. I imagine P.D. sleeping on the wooden floor, an accidental neighbor.

As Murphy and I continue along our journey, we reach the bench that is now covered with several inches of snow. Even though it's winter and the river is frozen, I can imagine how the water flows in the summer. Meanders twist and turn, they hide and reveal.

I look down and remember that I cannot see where the river goes when it passes the far bend. I cannot see what's coming around the upstream corner. I live near a meander. The currents are strong.

Erin Hemme Froslie teaches journalism at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, which is across the river from Fargo, North Dakota. She is studying at Bennington Writing Seminars for an MFA in nonfiction writing.

Armed

by James McKean

“I love guns, especially well-made pistols and revolvers,”
Andre Dubus — “Giving Up the Gun”

The blast struck me instantly stupid, ears ringing. My cheeks stung from powder burns and microscopic bits of lead. Why did I need to peer down the bright rifling? *Stupid*. My friend Terry, who had wanted to show me his new pistol—worried as he was about prowlers—stuck his head out from the kitchen, a half-made sandwich in hand. “Didn’t I tell you it was loaded?”

I couldn’t talk, haunted by the image of a .22 slug traveling though my eye. At least I’d turned the barrel up before I touched the trigger. I shook my head and pointed at his knotty pine ceiling. When I think back, the muzzle blast slaps my face again. Listen up, listen up, it says, you’re still capable of thought and by the way, what were you thinking?

Dumb luck convinced me to rethink my relationship to guns. I’m still convinced it was a good idea to disarm my mother-in-law, for example, sequestering her .38 Smith and Wesson snub-nosed revolver and the far more dangerous .32 Browning automatic that her grandson thought she needed for self-protection. He gave it to her a few years after she had been widowed and was living alone. She was eighty-six. As instructed, she kept her guns under the vacant pillow next to her at night. I'm not sure her grandson, well-meaning perhaps and enthusiastic certainly, had thought this self-defense reasoning all the way through.

"I stored your guns in a safe place.” I told her. “We can go shoot stuff any time you'd like." What I didn't mention is that given her macular degeneration she had a better chance of shooting her own foot hiding beneath the sheets or me late one morning or one of her grandkids, who in their most inquisitive moments just might discover the means to shoot themselves.

At the time, my arguments seemed sound but they’re not the whole story. My mother-in-law has been gone for many years, having lived seven more years after her

disarming, first with us, then in an assisted living apartment, and at the end in a nursing/hospice care facility, which indeed posted a no firearms policy at the front door.

Now, I realize that I coveted those weapons. I could build a case for taking them, but her snub-nosed .38 in my left hand and six corroded shells in my right charmed me by their legacy as well as their heft. Licensed to carry this gun, my father-in-law thought he needed to protect himself, a businessman who fought against unions striking the newspaper he ran during the 1950s and 1960s, who suffered from hostile opinions aimed at him and on occasion, real death threats.

My fascination has to be more than simply acculturation. Scott Sanders says that "wherever it comes from—genes or movies, phallic fixation or the breeze—this hankering for guns seems to be as potent in young boys as the hankering for sex will be later on." I grew up with guns. Not real guns, for my father had none, but toys, an arsenal of facsimiles: lever action popguns and wooden, rubber band pistols. Plastic revolvers with spring-loaded authentic looking bullets. Cap pistols in all degrees of realism, loaded with roll caps, single caps, or black cats stuck in the barrels around the 4th of July. I poured powder into a pipe, hit caps with a hammer or a rock, and when all else was lost or confiscated or run over in the driveway, a pointed finger and mouth noises had to do. Once, from Mickey Scott's cousin, I borrowed a BB gun with which I killed a robin with a blind shot between its eyes. Holding the warm, limp bird in my hand felt horrible. Another time Bruce Sarri and I found a real pistol stuffed between the couch cushions in his basement. It was magic even though someone had nipped the firing pin off. We knew plenty about guns and Gene Autry and John Wayne and Jim Arness, those heroes on T.V. and in the movies who carried Peacemakers in holsters, the bullets lined up like commandments in their belts.

I remember the carnival that set up one night in the vacant lot near the edge of North City. The next morning I stood next to the shooting gallery tent, where they used live ammo, .22 shorts, five shots at the metal ducks for a quarter. I looked all day along 15th Avenue for empty Coke and RC Cola bottles, redeemable for five cents apiece. When I found enough, I cashed them in at Ruland's store and paid my twenty-five cents to shoot a rifle for real, heavy and oil-covered and smelling powder-acrid. The report rang

in my ears. I'm not sure how many metal ducks I hit or if I knocked over the round spoon targets but I kept the brass casings, each with a nick in its rim.

If only I had as much enthusiasm for school. I knew about Colt 45s and the Buntline special, made famous by Wyatt Earp. I sent away for a life-size plastic Buntline replica model, waited forever, and glued the pieces together when the kit finally came and mounted it on my dresser disappointed only in its lack of heft. I studied a range of calibers from Howitzers to rim fire .22s, and noted rifling turns, powder types, magazine capability, and velocity. What I didn't understand was the devastation such weaponry could cause. Instead, I collected stories, mythological and local, awed by the danger and power inherent in lead and gunpowder. The gunfight at OK Corral defined cool headedness and heroics, and Natty Bumppo stood for great marksmanship, but my friend Skip's mishap with his dad's shotgun defined sheer power.

Maybe he still counts his blessings. Eleven at the time, with his parents out for the afternoon, Skip and a friend found his dad's pump 12-gauge shotgun in a closet. They took it to Skip's bedroom in case someone came home suddenly. They decided to hold it at the hip ready to fire like in the movies, first Skip and then his friend who pointed the shotgun toward Skip and said, "It's not loaded, right," just before it went off. Neither could hear after the blast nor see for the smoke and the atomized mattress stuffing and plaster from the wall behind the bed, sifting down now like snow from the ceiling. Skip had moved just in time.

They had a few hours before Skip's parents came home, so they mustered as much eleven-year-old industry and haste as possible: They propped up the bed's corner on pieces of two by four they found in the garage, sewed a towel around the end of the mattress, fixed the broken wall with wadded sheets of typing paper and a mixture of cream of wheat, emptying the box they found in the kitchen, swept up good, and returned the shotgun to the closet after ejecting the empty shell. So far so good. The next time Skip's mom tried to make the bed, however, the towel fell off and the wall slumped into a pile. Thus the occasion for a story. "And it better be good," she said.

What is it about such power that hypnotizes and impresses? When my friends in college covered their ears and shot a .32 revolver into the ceiling beam in their rented bachelor pad and stood on a chair and dug out the slug to see the rifling and how the lead

had been distorted, it was an amusing anecdote. So that's what happens, they seemed to conclude, as if the invisibly fast and powerful could be stopped and held. But when one of those guys fired his 300 magnum hunting rifle into the beam without thinking far enough ahead, the slug traveling through the beam, the floor in the bedroom above, the exterior wall and more than likely through the house next door into anybody's guess-where next, then we have the possibility of story, albeit a potentially tragic one.

I'm sure such stories are my vicarious forays into danger and power. Maybe the weapon itself, held in hand, serves as an artifact and prompt. You never have to fire a pistol to use it, but "if you feel the need to carry a gun, you need one everywhere," Andre Dubus says. And then of himself, "the territory of violence was in my imagination."

I do wonder, however, why such stories of guns and my imagination weren't enough for me. Why did I feel the need to buy a gun? As Sanders says, I traded in "the toys for the real things." My first was a Ruger .22 single six I bought in a sporting goods store in Moscow, Idaho. In 1964, I was going to school at Washington State University, and a friend drove me across the line to Moscow. The display case held Colt automatics, a variety of revolvers including the Ruger, with two cylinders, one for standard long rifle .22 shells and the other for magnums. No one asked any questions. I paid $65 dollars and the vendor handed over the Ruger. Once home, I varnished its wooden grips, cocking the hammer over and over to hear that metallic ratchet click and watch the cylinder turn.

Perhaps the Ruger helped me feel more connected to my friend Aaron, back only a year from Vietnam. I remember he asked me to call him "Sarge," but I felt uncomfortable with that, though that had been his rank. We sat in Aaron's apartment in Pullman, WA, Aaron snipping a few leaves from the cannabis plant growing behind a curtain on his windowsill. "I've already dried a few," he said, pasting together two Zig-Zag papers and rolling us a joint. "I used to ship weed home from Nam in film canisters," he said. "Grew this plant from some of the seeds."

Both Aaron and I enrolled at Washington State in 1964, but I lost track of him after he had dropped out to enlist for Vietnam. Now he was back in school, healed up he said, at least physically. He'd been a great athlete, but that was out, given the mobility problem with his right arm. "I'd never been in better shape," he said, "than when I was in Vietnam,"

and showed me a picture of himself with his helmet on, cocked to one side, staring at the camera, sleeves rolled, M-16 set on one hip.

Not long after our reunion, I bought another Ruger single six, this time a .357 magnum, power enough, I thought, to help me feel worthy to hear his stories, to sympathize, to comprehend, to get even the faintest idea. That weapon put me in harm's way by accident. Aaron loved to go shooting, and one day at the dump, we loaded the big Ruger with .357 wadcutters and took aim at a junked washing machine for no other reason than to hear the rounds go off and to feel the recoil up through our arms and into our shoulders and watch the sheet metal pock with holes. He and I took turns, standing side by side, two shots apiece. For the final two, I aimed for a grey spot at the back of the machine and pulled the trigger. As if no time elapsed after the report, an angry supersonic hornet snapped by my ear, inches from Aaron's head and mine. "What was that," I said, lowering the revolver.

"That was you," he said.

We walked over to the washing machine and could see that the gray spot was a half-round metal plug, maybe an inch and half in diameter and dish shaped, perfect for a 180-degree ricochet.

"That could have killed us," I said, grasping the obvious, shaken, my ears still ringing.

"Let me tell you about misses," Aaron said later when I brought up the errant wadcutter, and he proceeded to explain how he had been humping on a jungle trail and his squad had come across fresh dirt that led to a side trail. One of his men said "Hey, Sarge, I'm going to take a look," but Aaron said no too late. The soldier hadn't walked ten paces before someone shot him. He was yelling which meant the squad had to go get him. Then the air exploded. Aaron tried to hide behind a rock no bigger than a volleyball. The noise was awful. He lifted his rifle with both arms over his head and fired bursts into the jungle. Until something blew his helmet off, and the blood filled his eyes. Aaron said he reached up to find a hole in his forehead. Sure he was going to die, he waited to find out what was coming next, the firefight still hot. But nothing happened. Get the hell out of there was his next thought and he started crawling backwards down the shallow incline

as low as he could until something kicked him in the right shoulder and he plopped flat, all feeling in his right arm gone.

“Did someone drag you out?” I asked.

“No, I was just scooting back as far as I could, dragging my arm. By that time someone had called support and the VC took off. They had been bunkered at the end of that little trail and shot my guy to get us to come down there and we did.”

“What hit you?”

“A grenade first, I assume. Blew a hole in my skull. They had to put a plate in, but that took some time so I had a soft spot in my forehead like a baby for a while. Had to be careful. My arm was probably an AK-47 round. Someone missed.”

“Missed?” He had shown me pictures of the splint and bandaging of his arm, explaining how the bullet had entered the front of his right shoulder and exited the back of his arm, breaking the bone cleanly.

“Think about it. The VC were directly in front of us. I was backing out rear end first. What they would see is the top of my head getting smaller, and I’m sure that was the target. Whoever fired aimed a little left; nicked my ear maybe, and the slug went through my arm. Missed my head. Something like the dump?”

“Not sure about that,” I said.

We had many conversations. We played the blues and Neal Young on the reel to reel he brought home from Japan; we smoked dope. I listened mostly.

“It’s hard to fathom what you went through,” I’d tell him. He moved to Australia to teach and to be close to his girlfriend whom he had met in Australia on one of his R and R leaves from Vietnam. When they married and moved back to Washington, both to teach in middle school, Aaron took up target shooting as a hobby, using special single-shot handguns designed to fire rifle rounds. He reloaded his own shells, tracked competitions, and started woodworking because they had three kids in quick succession. He wanted to make them toys.

Maybe kids do the disarming. I’m not sure Aaron kept up his gun hobby. I have heard he is the librarian at a middle school, a place where guns are safe between the pages and shelved. When my wife and I had a baby girl, a .357 magnum Ruger in the house felt like an intruder, bad company. Maybe I was just growing older or up, a course

having children expedites. Maybe the fate of the bartender at the Ranch bar in Kennewick, WA, convinced me. He knew me and laughed at my lame jokes. Stopping by one Wednesday afternoon, I was surprised he wasn't there because he usually worked weekdays. I asked the woman behind the bar, his sub I presumed, "Where's Matt today?"

"Haven't you heard?" the woman said. "Hunting accident. Shot by his son. His own damn fault, I'd say"

She was angry, and when I asked around, I heard that Matt had taken his twelve-year-old son duck hunting, a blind on the Snake River. Maybe the twelve-gauge semi-automatic was too much to handle because the recoil knocked the kid back, and he brought the shotgun down as he fell and squeezed off another shot by accident into the side of his dad's head.

How does a twelve-year-old replay that story the rest of his life?

I don't know. I chose not to go back to the Ranch bar, having no answers. I stopped riding motorcycles because my own imagination began to frighten me. We moved to Iowa to go to school and find employment. I worked harder at being reasonable and raising a family. Still, the Glocks, the .40 caliber Berettas, the Colts lined up in the display case at Fin and Feather, the local sporting goods store in Iowa City, drew my attraction. Did my daughter growing up and getting married change my concern for safety? My need to indulge? Or did these weapons represent an oversimplified answer to a complicated and ambiguous and sometimes threatening world? After a dustup when he aimed his gun at a young man, Andre Dubus said, "I had no conflict, because I had only one choice. Now I wanted more choices." Choices take time, thought, and faith in a future, and come to think of it, "gun play" seems like a contradiction in terms.

I still own my first Ruger .22 single six and my father-in-law's snub-nosed .38, though they have been locked in a friend's gun safe in Kennewick, WA, for thirty years. On several occasions, he offered to send them to me after we moved to Iowa, a state that has since greatly relaxed its restrictions for toting a gun. But even years ago, all I needed for an Iowa concealed-carry permit was to apply at the Sheriff's office. The application form asked for my name, where I lived, if I had a criminal record, if I'd had firearm training, and whether or not I considered myself a sane person. I felt safe with those questions.

The problem lay with the form’s space for “Reason for Application.” The more I thought about it, nothing seemed to fit.

James McKean has published three books of poems, *Headlong*, *Tree of Heaven*, and *We Are the Bus*; and two book of essays, *Home Stand: Growing Up in Sports* and *Bound.* His prizes include a Great Lakes Colleges Association's New Writer Award in Poetry, an Iowa Poetry Prize, The X.J. Kennedy Poetry Prize, and essays reprinted in issues of *Best American Sports Writing* and the *Pushcart Prize* Anthology. A Professor Emeritus at Mount Mercy University in Cedar Rapids, IA, he still teaches for the low residency M.F.A. program at Queens University in Charlotte, NC, The Tinker Mountain Writers’ Workshop at Hollins University in Roanoke, VA, and The Iowa Summer Writing Festival in Iowa City.

Contributors

Beth Benedix is Professor Emerita of world literature, religious studies, and community engagement at DePauw University, and founder and director of The Castle, a nonprofit organization that partners with public schools in Putnam County, IN. A prolific writer, her third book, *Ghost Writer (A Story About Telling a Holocaust Story),* was named a finalist for the 2019 Next Generation Indie Awards and her most recent, *The Post-Pandemic Liberal Arts College: A Manifesto for Reinvention* (co-authored with Steve Volk), has contributed to a national conversation about higher ed. Most recently, she produced a documentary film, "North Putnam," directed by award-winning filmmaker, Joel Fendelman. When she's not hanging out with her husband and two sons, she's playing keyboards with her band, Black Market Vinyl.

Phil Cummins is an Irish academic and writer of fiction and non-fiction. His work is published in *Crannóg, Fictive Dream, bioStories*, and elsewhere. He has also achieved both honourable mention (2020 anthology) and shortlist (2022) for the Fish Memoir Prize.

Sarah DeParis is a physician and surgeon who left clinical medicine after a long struggle with depression and anxiety. Her writing about this experience began as an all-consuming urge to understand and heal. In the end, she realized it was a story about shedding a deeply ingrained identity and starting over—a pervasive human experience. In her life after medicine, she has (re)discovered passions for animals, art, and creative writing. She is happiest when snuggling her dogs, riding her horse, or spending time with her people.

Michael Engelhard is the author of *Ice Bear: The Cultural History of an Arctic Icon* and, most recently, of the memoir *Arctic Traverse: A Thousand-Mile Summer of Trekking the Brooks Range*. He lives in Fairbanks, Alaska, and guided wilderness trips for twenty-five years.

Mary Fairchild has spent a lifetime toiling in the vineyards and the canyons of the English language—writing, editing, reporting, reading, proofreading, designing, laying out, publishing, etc. She had a long career as a classical music radio announcer and now writes program notes for classical music concerts. She handled investor relations at a large international insurance broker, and she worked the police beat as a reporter at her local daily in New York's Hudson Valley and the equity research beat as an editor at Goldman, Sachs & Co.

Erin Hemme Froslie teaches journalism at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, which is across the river from Fargo, North Dakota. She is studying at Bennington Writing Seminars for an MFA in nonfiction writing.

Lory Widmer Hess found her life transformed when she began working with developmentally disabled adults ten years ago. She now lives with her family in the Jura mountains of Switzerland and is in training as a spiritual director. Her book *When Fragments Make a Whole: A Personal Journey Through Healing Stories in the Bible* will be published in 2024 by Floris Books. Visit her website at enterenchanted.com.

Barbara Krasner holds an MFA from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her work has been featured in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Nimrod*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *South 85*, *The Smart Set*, *museum of americana*, and elsewhere. She lives and teaches in New Jersey.

A former Pulitzer finalist, **Sydney Lea** served as founding editor of *New England Review* and was Vermont's Poet Laureate from 2011 to 2015. In 2021, he was presented with his home state's Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts. He has published twenty-four books: a novel, five volumes of personal and three of critical essays, and sixteen poetry collections, most recently *What Shines* (Four Way Books, NYC, 2023). His sixth book of personal essays, *Such Dancing as We Can,* is due in early 2024, and his second novel, *Now Look,* in spring of that year.

Mark Lewandowski is the author of the story collection, *Halibut Rodeo*. His essays, stories, and scripts have appeared in many literary journals, including *The Gettysburg Review*, *The North American Review* and *The Florida Review*. In addition to numerous Best of the Net and Pushcart nominations, his work has been listed as "Notable" in *The Best American Essays*, *The Best American Travel Writing*, and *The Best American Nonrequired Writing*. He has taught English as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Poland and as a Fulbright Scholar in Lithuania. Currently, he a Professor of English at Indiana State University.

Bryan Mammel teaches high school English and Journalism in central Texas. He is a father of two, a birder, a nature enthusiast, a hiker, and a hooper. Before teaching, Bryan traveled the country as a touring musician, playing keyboards and synthesizers for a variety of studio projects. Reading and writing have always been his anchor. This is his first foray into publishing his own writing.

James McKean has published three books of poems, *Headlong*, *Tree of Heaven*, and *We Are the Bus*; and two book of essays, *Home Stand: Growing Up in Sports* and *Bound.* His prizes include a Great Lakes Colleges Association's New Writer Award in Poetry, an Iowa Poetry Prize, The X.J. Kennedy Poetry Prize, and essays reprinted in issues of *Best American Sports Writing* and the *Pushcart Prize* Anthology. A Professor Emeritus at Mount Mercy University in Cedar Rapids, IA, he still teaches for the low residency M.F.A.

program at Queens University in Charlotte, NC, The Tinker Mountain Writers' Workshop at Hollins University in Roanoke, VA, and The Iowa Summer Writing Festival in Iowa City.

Mario Moussa is a writer living in Philadelphia. His stories have appeared in *Write City, Flash Fiction Magazine, Loud Coffee Press*, and *Litbreak*.

Sharman Ober-Reynolds was born in Los Angeles and completed a master's in fine arts at Arizona State University. She is the primary author of *The FRIEND Program for Creating Supportive Peer Networks for Students with Social Challenges, including Autism*. For over thirty years, she worked in health care as a family nurse practitioner, primarily in autism research. In 2023, she was the first-place recipient of the Olive Woolley Bert Awards. Sharman now lives and writes in an old house in Salt Lake City with her family and Cadoodle, Lizzie.

David Riessen has been writing plays, screenplays, novels, and TV scripts on and off since he was a teenager. In the wake of his son's sudden death, he has found a home in creative nonfiction and has recently written *Nothing Lasts Forever,* a collection of stories and essays about loss, grief, and life. Some of these stories are featured in *Defenestration, Bright Flash Literary Review, Moon Park Review, Cool Beans Lit,* and now here in *bioStories Magazine*. David lives in Larchmont, New York with his wife Debi and dog Raven

Anup Saswade (cover art) is an artist working in both traditional and digital media. He enjoys creating stories through his paintings, with a particular passion for conceptual art and open-ended illustrations. He also loves exploring the relationship between text and visuals, bringing a unique dimension to his work. He lives in Bengaluru, Karnataka, India. To see more of his work, visit his portfolio site.

Clare Simons' essays about Amma, India's hugging saint were published in Parabola and *Spirituality & Health* Magazines. "The Greatest" appeared on the official Muhammad Ali website along with works by Joyce Carol Oats and Norman Mailer. Her creative nonfiction can be found on *Anti-Heroin Chic, Faith Hope & Fiction, Manifest Station, The Write Launch* and *Persimmon Tree*. Simons was the press person and gatekeeper to the stories of the terminally ill patient-plaintiffs defending Oregon's Death With Dignity Act at the U.S. Supreme Court, and worked for passage of assisted dying laws in several states. Publication of her memoir is forthcoming. To learn more, visit her website: https://www.clare-simons.com/