

WISING UP ANTHOLOGIES

ILLNESS & GRACE : TERROR & TRANSFORMATION

FAMILIES: *The Frontline of Pluralism*

LOVE AFTER 70

DOUBLE LIVES, REINVENTION &
THOSE WE LEAVE BEHIND

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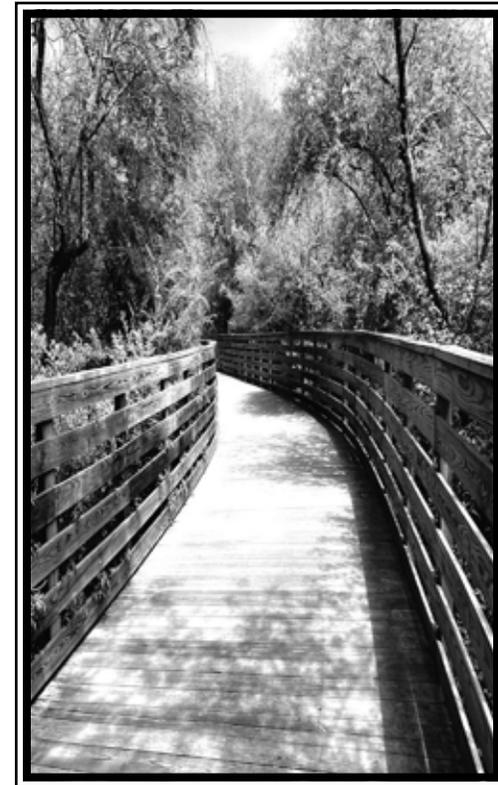
GOODNESS

FLIP SIDES
Truth, Fair Play & Other Myths We Choose to Live By:
Spot Cleaning Our Dirty Laundry

ADULT CHILDREN:
Being One, Having One & What Goes In-Between

THE POWER OF THE PAUSE

The Wonder of Our Here & Now



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Editors

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To those who saw us through,
to those we lost,
for hidden gifts that lifted us,
for gracious grounding . . .



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HEATHER TOSTESON

THE POWER OF THE PAUSE: THE WONDER OF OUR HERE & NOW

Human freedom involves our capacity to pause between the stimulus and response and, in that pause, to choose the one response toward which we wish to throw our weight. The capacity to create ourselves, based upon this freedom, is inseparable from consciousness or self-awareness.

—Rollo May, *The Courage to Create*

One of my favorite activities has always been to lie on the floor and watch shadows—or light—dance across a blank wall. I can do this for extended periods of time. It always feels stabilizing and replenishing. And mysterious. This moment when I am pure perception. Willing perception. The world is moving, obviously, or the shadows wouldn't be flickering. But I'm not and yet I am in full resonance with something transformed and transformative beyond me. I feel both choice and flow have been returned to me.

It is impossible to think about pause—a temporary stop—without thinking about flow, about inertia, about the arc of an action. Pause takes its meaning from what comes before and what comes after. Something that had its own incremental momentum has either exhausted itself—contradicted itself—or met something with equal or greater power, gravitas.

Pause makes us conscious of flow—the gift of flow. What it feels like to be carried along, lifted, propelled. Relieved of conscious choice. The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes creative flow as a state of great joy, "a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it." Even mundane flow, the propulsion of habit, has a pleasure and an economy to it. Pause disrupts that.

Pause insists on consciousness and choice because to restart an action requires energy and awareness. This is true whether the pause is voluntary or involuntary. Pulled out of flow, we can't assume inertial, unconscious





I
MEDITATION



KATHIE GIORGIO

SITTING

Abigail was tired of being called a hamster. She'd been thrown onto those squeaky metal wheels ever since she was a child and in the gifted and talented program. The school specialists told her parents that while it took most people at least thirty-three repetitions to learn something new, it took Abigail only twice, and so she needed greater volume and pace to her education. Her mind was thrown into the habitrail then and onto the wheel and she'd been rolling ever since.

"I can see the gears turning," people at work said.

"Turn that brain off, turn it off!" friends said when they landed on opposing teams in Trivial Pursuit or Risk or sat opposite her in chess.

"When do you even sleep?" everyone said when she spoke of happily attending seminars, workshops, taking classes in the arts, going to lectures and readings. Recently, she went to one of those new paint-while-you-drink-wine places, because then she could learn something new and be a social drinker at the same time. Learning never went down on the value curve for Abigail. She, and her hamster, were always on the hunt. Always on the wheel.

But everyone was right, too; she and the hamster didn't sleep. Now, at fifty-two years old, it was beginning to bother Abigail. A part of her was starting to circle, looking for rest. Permanent? She didn't think so. Just some quiet time. She looked at blank walls and felt envious.

"Maybe you should try meditation," her best friend Sarah said. Sarah, whose mind was active too, but more in a bloodhound sort of way, followed at a slower pace in Abigail's wake since they were both twenty-four years old. On vacations, Abigail and her hamster went on tours and lecture series; Sarah parked the bloodhound in a kennel and took herself to resorts and spas. Abigail envied her too, though not so much her bloodhound, and so she truly considered her friend's suggestion. Meditation, she thought. The act of not thinking.

Quiet time.

And so she tried. When she sat cross-legged in front of the French doors to her deck and closed her eyes, to take advantage of the spring sun warming her skin, her eyes cracked right back open and she noticed the windows were dirty and so she stood and washed them. When she moved out in the yard and sat in the garden, her eyes betrayed her again and she noticed an anomaly in the pattern of colors in the flowers and so she got up, went to the garden store, and bought purples and blues to balance everything out. The next day, she upped her meditation strategy and tried thwarting her eyes by sitting in a dark room, shades drawn, lights out, and a sleep mask tugged over her face. But then her other senses revolted on the side of vision. She felt the grime of the carpet beneath her and she smelled that the garbage can needed emptying and so she vacuumed and emptied and then rearranged the room in a more aesthetically pleasing and balanced way.

There seemed to be no shutting down. When Abigail tried to shut down, she opened up, along with her eyes, and this brought in more tasks and problems that would itch until she overcame them.

In hamster-style, in Abigail-style, and in frustration, Abigail decided to take a class. Meditation 101. It seemed ridiculous to her, really, that anyone would have to take a class in how to sit quietly and let her mind hold still. Why would that be so difficult? But for Abigail, and for her hamster, it was.

The class was held in a "mindfulness studio" that felt a bit intimidating. It was set back from a main highway outside of town. While it was surrounded by trees and there was a large green field out back, the sound of traffic and urban life was still right there in the parking lot. Abigail hesitated beside her car, her back to the road, her face toward the building, and she debated going in. If she went inside, she thought, she would sit in silence with others, the reverberation of a starting gong telling them to sink into a void of thought, and if anything entered her mind, it should be about the homework she assumed she'd have to do. As a result, in a roundabout way, she would meditate.

If she went home, if she gave in to the intimidation, it would be just another meditation failure. Before she even sat. Before she even closed her eyes.

Abigail went inside.

She was impressed with the room. It was long, narrow and well-balanced with one full wall of windows facing the green field. The other walls were painted a restful sky blue. There were chairs for those who weren't comfortable sitting on the floor, and cushions for those who were. Abigail was going to

RANDY MINNICH*I THINK THAT I SHALL NEVER SEE*

If trees had never grown on Earth
and photos back from Mars showed
hillsides of columnar things—
like Roman ruins with green feathers—

I might see trees—a while—astonished

that they burst right from the brick-red soil.
Maybe I'd ponder their slow determined life
from nut to gnarled crashing ruin,
their lives lived grazing on the sun.

Or maybe not. Amazement passes quickly,

for I live so swiftly down the highway
wonders such as trees tick by
like fenceposts by the roadside,
vanish in the distance, barely seen.

I should slow down.

But unlike sap, blood races on
down countless frantic inner paths
it sets itself upon and only briefly
looks beyond.

Seeing miracles takes time.

T'AI CHI TIME

5:25—Running late.
Thirty-five minutes to drive
a journey that took forty-five.
But my teacher had said, "don't rush.
Cover the dashboard clock.
Relax your thumbs. Sink into the seat.
Breathe all the way to your fingertips."
I arrived at 5:58.

"Impossible," I muttered.
My teacher shrugged.
"That's T'ai Chi time."

The master was late in Manhattan one day.
The cabby was darting,
gap to gap,
beating the horn,
swearing through lights.
Felt a tap on his shoulder:
"I'm in a hurry.
Please slow down."



II ILLNESS



STEPHANIE HART

ONLY NOW

It is the early time of Covid. I'm at a writing workshop on Martha's Vineyard in a circle of women in face masks. Seated six feet apart in our instructor's backyard, we are wary of each other. Are there germs in the air that might kill us? Will we pummel each other with criticism?

Our instructor, Sally Henry, is a genteel woman in her late thirties. Dressed in a green peasant blouse and harem pants, she speaks in a serene voice. She welcomes us and invites us to feel comfortable during our time together. We introduce ourselves, talk briefly about the joys of writing: the catharsis of memoir, the delight when fictional characters come to life. And the pitfalls: the times when characters stubbornly refuse to speak, and memoir falls short of the emotional mark we want to reach. Sally listens attentively. She says, "Why not put aside your writing projects for today. We'll pause, breathe, and inhabit the moment as we write through the senses." Her blue eyes are earnest, but I'm perplexed. I'm not fond of meditative practices. I have a restless mind, silence frightens me.

Sally, I think, tries to assuage any doubts we may have with a story from her own life. She tells about her daughter Melissa's chronic illness, how it riddled her with fear, worry. How she could not be present in a way that was comforting to Melissa. Then, daily walks in the woods began to fortify her. Each morning she would hug the thick bark of a tree, let shade and shadow play over her body.

Sally smiles at us with her blue eyes. "I learned to commune with each moment as if there were no other. This pause allowed my body and soul to quiet. In time, I acquired vitality and calm to take to my daughter's bedside."

Sally presses her hands together. "Now we're going to apply this same principle to liberating your creative energy. Giving you freedom from constraint on the page. Are you game?"

We nod. Myself more reluctantly than the other women.

"Okay then. Let's begin. Close your eyes. Now breath in slowly through your nose and out through your mouth. Pause. Clear your mind. Breath in again."

My mind is anything but clear. I want to open my eyes to check for bees in the vicinity, for women who have dropped their masks, releasing Covid particles in the air, for storm clouds that might be gathering. Who will be on danger alert if I'm not?

Sally keeps talking. After a while her voice becomes a chant. One I almost want to listen to. "Pause. Breath in and out. Clear your mind. Now choose a color from the spectrum. Let your color enter from the top of your head and move through your body."

I choose blue for its soothing properties.

"Pause," Sally says. "Breath. Keep your focus on your color and its movement."

Despite my desire to remain vigilant, I feel my body relax. I'm floating on my back on blue sea where waves cradle rather than threaten me. Thoughts slip away without my willing them to.

"Breath in, breath out," Sally says. "One more time. Now slowly open your eyes. Look around you. When you're ready, pick up your pen. Record what you see, hear, feel, and smell. Don't let thoughts bog you down. Write as if you were flying."

I open my eyes. Survey the scenery. Sights, sounds, colors come alive with a vibrancy that is new. I'm experiencing the backyard for the first time. My pen moves easily across the page. This is what I write:

I feel the wind, I hear chimes, a motor hums, birds sing and stop. I hear a rake, a hammer, and a whistle. I see red, yellow and orange wildflowers. I watch them bend unselfconsciously.

Something catches the corner of my eye. I turn toward it. I discover rocks on a table and a giant sand-colored five-point star nailed to the gray brick of a New England house. I see white lace curtains on a rectangular window. I see a profusion of blue flowers, fists of delicate petals. I see perfectly clear sky and giant trees, green leaves against the blue, trembling and then still. I see a chimney made (I think) of Flemish brick. There! Was that so difficult?

Attunement to the moment is rare for me, and so now gives me a heady feeling. My writing flourishes in the coming days of the workshop. I capture my grandmother's spirit as she stands on the deck of a ship escaping the Russian pogroms and heading for America. The other women write with a

THE HURT ITSELF

There was no one to blame
when I closed the laptop
and got up from the chair
and tripped over the cat

(who was just sitting there
quietly minding his own
ruminations in the shadow
of the chair) and fell forward

and hit my shoulder hard
against the fireplace mantle,
jamming my index finger,
and knocking over a knick-knack

made of glass (which belonged
to my mother, who'd been dead
twenty-nine years). I winced
and held my aching shoulder,

and licked my smarting knuckle,
and surveyed the broken glass.
And then I looked around for
someone to blame. It wasn't

my fault that I didn't see the cat
hidden in the shadow. It wasn't
the cat's fault for being a cat
ruminating in shadow behind a chair,

and it wasn't my mother's fault
for buying a glass knick-knack,
and dying, and leaving it to me.
Leave it to me, I always find

someone to blame. But this time
there was no one, there was nothing.
Which hurt more than the hurt itself
almost. And then it hurt differently

than the hurt. Then less than the hurt.
And finally, in that pause, not blaming
anyone for the hurt itself didn't hurt at all.
And it felt new. It felt good. Almost.



III TRAUMA



BETH CHRISTENSEN

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS

1974

I am just shy of seventeen years old, beginning my senior year at a small Catholic high school in a run-down section of town, the kind of place from which white people are fleeing to the suburbs and the buildings themselves seem to be throwing in the towel. High school has been difficult for me and is getting more so all the time. I hate my teachers, my classes, and all but a couple of my classmates. I don't study—I *can't* study—any more, so my grades suck. My thinking has become increasingly fragmented and confusing, like a bunch of Scrabble pieces spilled onto the floor. There is often yelling going on inside my head, voices that I know but don't know. I get yelled at by other people, too—parents and teachers mostly. When they yell at me, I often have trouble understanding what they are saying. I wish it would all just quiet down, just for a little while. Pot makes it quiet down, or at least it makes me less bothered by all the noise. At this point I am smoking a lot of pot.

I go to a psychiatrist once a week. I have been seeing him for about two years and taking the medications he has prescribed for me, but I haven't been getting any better; in fact, I have been getting worse and by now am quite sure that I am becoming insane. His office is a short bus ride from my school. I get on the bus near school, and it sighs and heaves its way down a narrow street past old, mostly neglected mansions, shotgun houses with tattered shutters on their windows and faded peeling paint, and narrow, dingy storefronts the dozen or so blocks to my stop. I get off the bus, and as I walk the three blocks to my doctor's office my head gets lighter, feeling kind of like a helium balloon on a string, and it feels as if, were I to let go of the string, it might disappear altogether—kind of like the feeling you get when you are about to faint, but I don't faint. I open the iron gate with a rusty hinge that creaks with a tortured moan, and I walk up to the door of this old Victorian house that

has been carved up into offices. I know my legs are carrying me, but I can't really feel them anymore. I seem to float up the dark wooden stairs; they creak with every step, and the fact that I am able to produce a sound is somewhat surprising to me.

At the top of the stairs there is a receptionist tucked into a tiny office. She answers phone calls and types, making what seem to me to be efficient clacking sounds, and I just step into the doorway of her little office. I don't have to tell her my name, she already knows who I am. She says something to me, or maybe she just nods in recognition of my arrival, and I take a seat in his narrow waiting room. My floating head and absent legs are still there, but now I become more aware of the pounding of my heart. I wonder if someone could see it beating through my shirt, the feeling of it beating is so strong. My hands are clammy, and I wipe them repeatedly on my blue plaid school skirt, pressing it against my thighs. I want to run away, but I can't. I don't know why I can't, but I can't. This question would torture me many years later: Why didn't I just run away? Surely I could have gotten up and left, so why didn't I? Why? It would become one of the hardest questions I would ever have to confront.

His door opens, and I hear his voice. That voice is imprinted on my mind, so strongly that if I heard him in a crowd of a thousand people, I could pick out his voice and my heart would pound again. His patient, the one he has just finished seeing, is going down the creaking stairs now, and then I hear him close the door at the bottom of the stairway. The doctor says good night to his receptionist, and I hear her gathering her things before she too heads down the resonant stairs and out of the building. I'm his last appointment of the day. The building is quiet, and I feel him stepping into the waiting room before I see him. His voice—that voice that is like no other—speaks my name and I obediently stand up and follow him into his office. He closes his doors; there are two of them with a space between them, and each one locks. He says that the double doors are for privacy, so people in the hallways or the waiting room can't hear what we are saying. I already know that there is no one who will hear me, regardless of the doors. I now belong fully to him, and he leads my automaton-like body through the main room, furnished with a sofa and chairs, into the second room, which is outfitted only with large floor pillows over a thick reddish carpet. He had told me once that this room was used for group therapy. He looks at me and smiles as he says something, but I don't know what he is saying. Whatever it is, as he says it, he is beginning to

MARY JUMBELIC

THAT KID

I channeled what my mentor had taught me as I sat rigid on the witness stand. In my forensic pathology training, when I had asked my chief how he handled the tough cross-examinations, he said, "You've got to remember, you're the doctor." As I stared at the attorney who was expecting my answer, being the coroner's physician didn't feel very helpful.

"Can you answer the question or not?" she said. She stood behind the defense table and gripped the edge.

The courtroom was quiet, just a few observers, the attorneys, the defendants, the judge, and me. There was no jury; this was a bench trial.

"I don't know," I said.

"You don't know if you can answer the question or is that your answer?" She sparred.

Her line of questioning had taken an abrupt departure from the case. I was an expert witness in a trial of caretakers charged with medical negligence. I had autopsied an elderly woman and determined the cause of death to be sepsis related to untreated bed sores on her back: open and gaping, allowing bacteria to spread to her blood, and her organs to shut down.

"Can you repeat the question?" I said. This was my signal that trouble lay ahead. If I said it in response to the lawyer who requested my opinion in court, it meant "Are you sure you want the answer to that question?" If I said it to the opposing counsel, it was a trigger for the other attorney to object. No one picked up on this.

"Okay, Doctor." She smiled. "Isn't it possible for someone to have a widespread infection and a caretaker not to recognize the severity?" She was the lawyer for the middle-aged couple who claimed they never saw a bed sore on the woman. At autopsy the wound cavity was deep, down to bone over the sacrum, and putrefying. The defense theory seemed to be that anyone can miss a life-threatening infection, even licensed caregivers.

Experience taught me not to engage attorneys in hypothetical battles. The speculative information provided never had the detail obtained in real forensic investigations. When I expressed a professional opinion in a death, I relied on data, not concocted notions to suit the circumstance. Lawyers dealt in minute possibilities; medical examiners dealt in credible probabilities.

"I don't know," I said. "In what circumstance? Where was the inciting injury? Was it visible? What type of infection? Who was the caregiver? Who was the patient? Could they express discomfort?" My questions streamed like a magician pulling endless handkerchiefs from the mouth. Still, no one objected. "I need comprehensive information to form an opinion."

I looked over at the prosecution, hoping they recognized this vague and broad line of questioning should be invalid.

Opposing counsel's smile didn't falter. She leaned ever more forward toward the witness stand; her eyes bore into me.

"Okay, let's get specific," she said. "You took your son to the hospital yesterday because he had an unrecognized infection, isn't that true?" She didn't wait for my answer. "You missed his infection, didn't you, Doctor?"

Tears filled my eyes and spilled down my cheeks. Her outline blurred. No one had ever talked about my family in a court of law. It felt like I had stopped breathing. I turned to the judge.

"I need to use the bathroom," I said. I had never cried on the witness stand or had any excuse to interrupt my testimony; in the years that followed, I never did again.

"Objection," said the prosecutor. It sounded like he was objecting to my need for the bathroom.

I didn't wait for the judge's reply but hurried from the courtroom. The door banged behind me. I sat on the toilet in the ladies' room in my suede gray suit. My head dropped to my knees.

"Dr. J?" The female prosecutor stood outside the stall.

"How did she know?" I said.

"When we delayed the trial yesterday, I told her why," she said. "I never thought she would bring it up in court."

I had spent the day before with my son, David, at the hospital. He had an overwhelming infection in his hand and needed emergency surgery and intravenous antibiotics. I stayed overnight with him, hardly sleeping, and showed up in court earlier this day.

"I am not going back in there," I said, sounding like a spoiled child



IV
QUOTIDIAN



RICHARD LEBLOND

THE NATURAL MOMENT

This has been an unusually busy winter for me. What used to be a given—a daily walk in the outer Cape Cod woods—has become a luxury. There is meager compensation from being too busy to fret about it.

But prolonged absences can make us more receptive to what is known as the natural moment. This is a sudden, unexpected event, such as an encounter with an animal or a sound out of the blue. It is a moment that has the form if not the content of revelation. The mind is instantly ushered from its internal rumination to a state of external awareness. It is a wake-up call.

One recent night I took our dog outside for his last chance before bed. It was a calm night, warm for early spring, and not a cloud in the sky. While the dog frantically searched for that perfect place, I sat down on the bench we had rescued from a junk heap at a Hyannis pond. It was while sitting on the bench that I was hit broadside by the natural moment.

As so often happens, the moment was generated by a sound. It was neither a loud nor a sudden sound, and had been there all along, unnoticed. It crept up behind and leaped into my awareness, and for a few moments I experienced a state of higher consciousness, a mind disconnected from its preoccupations and reconnected with the world around it. It was one of those moments during which a sense of time and place is simultaneously pinpointed and obliterated.

The source of the sound was the ocean; specifically, the sound of heavy surf on the outer beach two miles away. The previous day we had been visited by a Nor'easter, and though the wind was gone, the sea continued to thrash the shore, releasing stored energy. The sound of the surf, though distant and of few decibels, was nonetheless huge and primal. It was a sound I had heard many times before, but this time there was something in it that seemed out of ancient memory, a sound originally heard from the other side of the surf, from within the sea.

The natural moment was further elaborated by the arrival of a second sound, that of a foghorn. There was no need for a foghorn on such a clear and windless night, and I fancied that this sound, like the waves, was a product of yesterday's storm, disconnected and tossed about, a false hope for a lost mariner.

Not all sudden or unexpected sounds result in the natural moment. Some produce the unnatural moment, and these most often are of human origin, usually mechanical. Nowhere is one entirely free of them. Even in remote wilderness airplanes can be heard or their vapor trails seen.

But origin is relative, and whether a stimulus is mind-expanding or annoying isn't always determined by whether it was produced by nature or by man. The nearest I have come to prolonged experiences of only natural sounds has been during lengthy stays in a dune shack. Yet one of my favorite sounds in that solitude happens at night, under the quilt, listening to the distant putter of fishing boats. They sound like giant faraway butterflies with piston-driven wings.

A wondrous mockingbird provided my favorite dune moment. The bird was on the other side of a cranberry bog, in a beach plum thicket. I was only partly listening to it when it mimicked the call of a Fowler's toad. That caught my full attention, so I sat down on the lower slope of the dune on my side of the bog. This bird did each call twice, then went on to the next. He focused on the dune aviary, but allowed the occasional shorebird, and mimicked another dune toad, the American. But his *tour de force* was not the mimicry of a natural sound at all. He perfectly captured the muted sound of a semi-truck passing on Route 6 a mile away, immediately followed by the passing of a second truck. Then he continued with his accounting of the dune aviary. After that, a mile-away truck became one of my favorite sounds in the dunes. It had become the call of a mockingbird.

But back to the foghorn we left adrift a few moments ago. It and two cohorts were responsible for another of my favorite natural moments on Cape Cod. It was an August day in 1974, after I had just returned from a two-year absence. I was standing on the low bluff that sits between Village Pond and Cape Cod Bay in North Truro, refreshing my memory. I was wondering why the foghorns at Race Point, Wood End, and Long Point were sounding on such a clear day when all of a sudden the three of them bellowed at once.

For those of you familiar with such things, it was in more ways than one a major chord. I later asked our resident composer about this phenomenon.

RUSS ALLISON LOAR*ZERO*

Zero,
 Ever been there?
 I hear the weather's nice
 This time of year.

I was there last fall,
 Just in time to see no leaves changing no colors on no trees.
 So beautiful,
 Like nothing I'd ever seen before.

The trip was a little rough,
 And long,
 Just when it seemed like Zero was in sight,
 Along came something else
 And my curiosity would get the better of me,
 Stopping to explore one thing after another.

But finally,
 After a very long day full of starts and stops,
 After I was completely worn out,
 After I had just about enough of everything,
 There it was:
 Zero.

So beautiful,
 Like nothing I'd ever seen before.

A PURPLE SHOELACE

As I walk toward the growing darkness
 Along the sunset trail,
 The last of the after-hour walkers pass me by,
 Returning to their parked cars
 And nightly routines.

Many are deep in determined conversation
 With walking partners or cellphone voices.
 Others are earbud oblivious,
 Even to their over-eager dogs,
 Straining at the leash.

I am alone in silence,
 Bearing witness to the last auburn rays of light
 Retreating from nearby hillsides,
 Earlier each day now.
 I hear rustling leaves whisper the coming of autumn.

And there,
 One lost purple shoelace,
 Tied to a chain-link fence.

MOLLY RIVKIN

THE GIRL WITH UPSIDE DOWN EYES

I watch the sky transform from pale gold to electric pink, then settle into a milky gray. A mass of clouds above the horizon's edge reflects the sun's descent. I sit in the snow, alone, and am cleared of any doubt I have been carrying. There is something so deeply honest about the sunset, something so deeply honest about Montana. Something pure. As I gaze at the slowly changing sky, other sunsets flash into my mind.

I am twenty-eight years old, standing alone in Regents Park in London, England. I have been here for an hour and the sun has started to set. I've been wandering a lot lately, picking up pigeon feathers, and trying to find meaning in the small patches of greenery amid a vast cityscape. I spend a lot of time sitting on park benches and staring at the sky, trying to silence my mind. I know I am deeper and vaster than my thoughts, but I am still searching for what that really means. So often the swirls and currents of passing thoughts carry me along and I am oblivious to my environment. I am seeking desperately. This is the second or maybe third time my mind has betrayed itself, and unraveled.

The first few times it was not shocking enough to change my personality too much. I have never been diagnosed with a mental health issue, but then again I have never spent too much time with a psychologist. I have been reasonably successful at any endeavor I have applied myself to but cannot deny my mind has edges. After tottering on those edges many times, I have recently taken a terrifying fall. Maybe we'll talk more about that later, maybe not. The point is, I am desperately seeking. I have started a hot yoga practice in a studio near Primrose Hill, a nice part of London.

That's where I live, with my haughty aunt. I have come to London to attain a master's degree in creative writing, specializing in spoken word poetry. A new and burning passion. I am doing well, despite the newness, strangeness, and courage it takes to share my heart in the form of spoken

word poetry. Originally from a dysfunctional, but loving family in the rural mountains of northern Idaho, USA, I am not used to the cold aloofness of the city. My aunt's business-like approach to our relationship confuses me immensely. I had not yet learned detachment when I arrived in London, but certainly will by the time I depart.

We live in a large row house which my grandmother purchased in the 1960s for a reasonable price. Since her investment, the property value has sky-rocketed, and the neighborhood has become quite posh. My aunt's attitude has become quite posh with the neighborhood. I don't know how to relate. I have just finished a two-year Peace Corps stint in Ukraine, ending in a revolution and evacuation. I am very villagey in my demeanor and thinking. Posh doesn't make sense to me. I've been juggling so many different cultural identities. I am lost.

There is a lot more to the backstory and really the situation in general. Maybe we'll talk more about that later, but for now I am standing in Regents Park watching the most dazzling red sunset and singing softly to myself with a palm full of feathers. It's chilly. Damp, light mist, fall in London chilly. The trees on the other side of the football pitch look a bit like trees I've seen pictures of in the Sahara Desert. The deep red painted across the sky could be an African sunset if I forget the cold. I raise my voice a bit, a single note, not a song. Just sound evaporating into a rich and endless red. I sing until my voice is part of my body, and so I am real.

I sing until the light fades and the city sparkles around me. I am not a singer, but I do not care, this is not for anyone to hear, it is a gentle reminder that I have not disappeared. I feel weary as I walk back to my aunt's house. I hope she is asleep so I will not have to talk to her. I plan to go to yoga in the morning, and walk, and write and drink coffee. I plan to do everything in my power to stay alive another day. I am not sure why I have this tenacious instinct to cling to life. I am not sure why I am alive in the first place. The past couple of years have disconnected me from every relationship that has ever sustained me. Still, something in me begs to be kept alive, so I fight for that part every single day, and ignore the part that wants to die.

I live a privileged life. I know this. Even if it is held up by student loan debt. I have decided I am a writer and am in the process of creating that reality. I know how rare it is to have this opportunity and I remind myself daily, but I seem to have also acquired a writer's curse: a suicidal tendency and an unstable mind. I am not reckless with my body, I rarely get too drunk

MURALI KAMMA

LEARNING THE GAME

Opening the creaky door to enter the lobby, Hari was so surprised to see him—an older white man, walking briskly in his direction—that he stared, without meaning to, before smiling in embarrassment when the man said hello. Dressed in a plaid blue flannel shirt and tan cargo pants, he seemed to be in his late seventies. His wispy, unruly white hair, a little long, stuck out on the sides, and he wore rimless glasses and a gray beret, giving him a vaguely bohemian look. Perhaps the beret covered a bald patch, Hari thought, as he returned his greeting and kept the door open, waiting until the man, thanking him politely, exited the building.

The frayed carpet gave off a faint musty odor, which mingled with cooking smells, as Hari passed the elevator—now working, unlike last time—and climbed the stairs, two at a time, till he reached the third floor. The aging, graffiti-scarred building had seen better days, and the protruding window air-conditioners, for those apartments that had them, made it clear that a renovation was long overdue. Stopping at the second door, he knocked.

Hari wondered why he'd reacted in that cringe-inducing manner when he saw the man in the lobby. The sitcom he'd begun writing, albeit only in his head and when he needed a diversion, was taking an unexpected turn. So far, the only characters to make an appearance were immigrants and refugees who lived in this building. For the opening shot, Hari had envisioned a bunch of residents in front of the building. But since none of them were white, here was a twist to throw viewers off and make the beginning more intriguing. What was this older gentleman doing in a building filled with foreign-born people who were younger and didn't look like him?

On Hari's previous visits, he'd only seen people of color, almost all of whom were recent refugees and immigrants. Was the man a visitor, like Hari? Possibly. More likely, he lived in the building—and his presence, announced so early, added to the drama forming in Hari's head.

Hari's real-life job was more mundane, though he liked it. A staff correspondent for *Diaspora Weekly*, he was currently working on a feature article about refugees and other recent immigrants in the neighborhood. How did the two communities get along, and what sort of challenges did they face while adapting to their new lives in America? Having already talked to a bunch of people, he was now returning for one of his last interviews. The door opened to reveal Abdul. A slightly built man with a gentle manner and a receding hairline, he welcomed Hari with a smile and introduced him to his wife, Nilofar, who was in the living room close by.

After the interview was over, as Hari put away his recorder, Nilofar brought cups of tea and Parle-G biscuits from the kitchen. Sipping the soothing, fragrant beverage, Hari casually mentioned the man he'd seen in the lobby. Yes, they knew him but not very well, Abdul said. He came to the nearby park to watch the residents play cricket.

"Cricket?" Hari looked up from his cup, wondering if he'd heard correctly.

Abdul laughed. "Yes. His name is Morris. For a long time, he was confused by the rules. But he still comes, to watch and chat with the players. He likes the game now."

While Abdul, who was less outgoing than the cricket players, didn't know him as well as they did, the old man was friendly, he said, if a little eccentric.

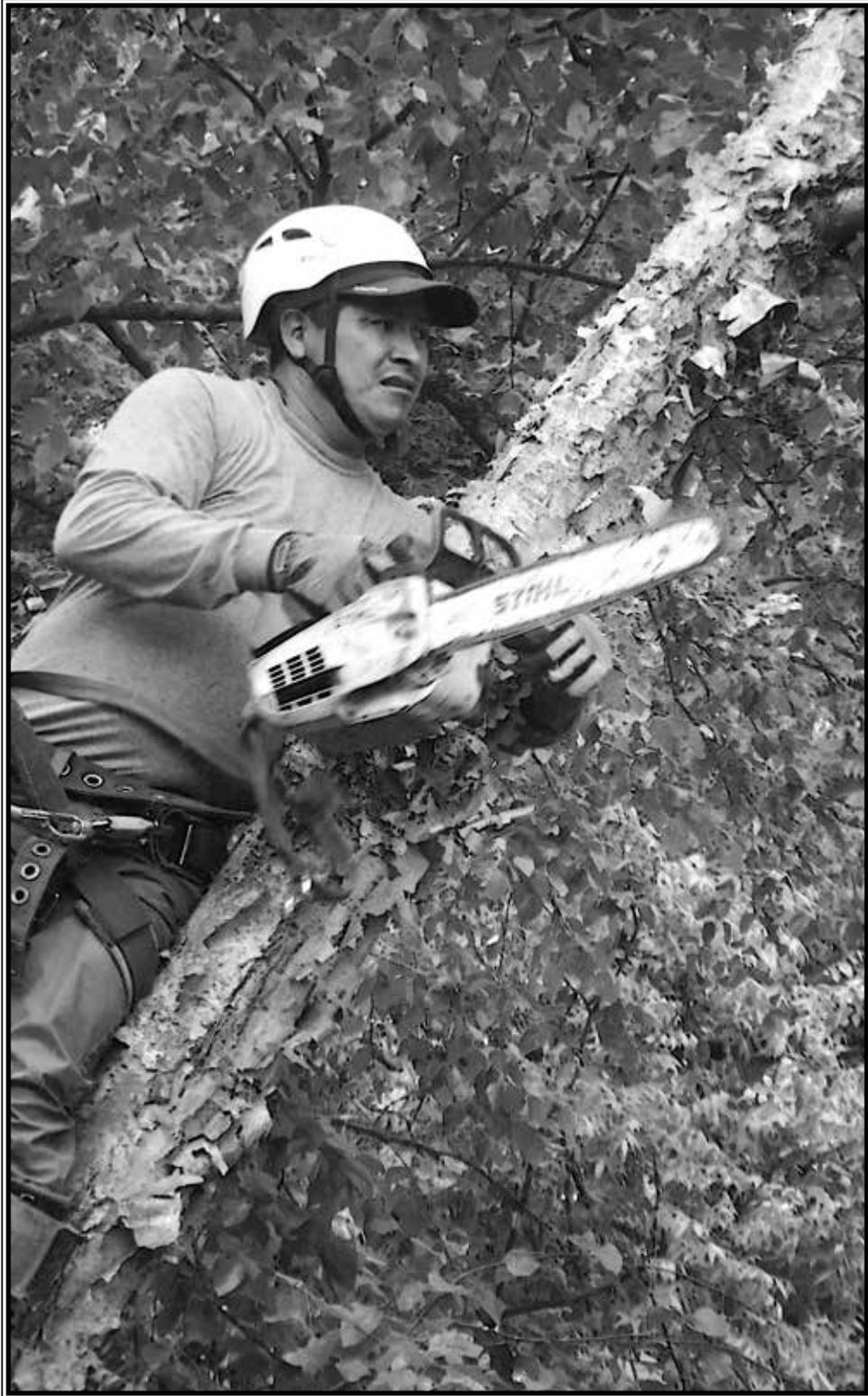
"How so?"

"Well, he's the only American here . . . I should say white American. I don't ever see him with other whites who are family or friends."

Hari was baffled by this reasoning, but instead of questioning Abdul further, he thanked him and Nilofar for their time and hospitality, and said he'd be back in a couple of days.

Reaching the main street, after walking along a cracked sidewalk flanked by uncut weeds, Hari saw a food cart, parked strategically close to a metro bus stop. The rain had left puddles of muddy water, which pedestrians had to watch because of passing vehicles. A commercial strip on the other side of the street had a grocery store, a couple of ethnic restaurants, a thrift store, and a hair salon. From the food cart, Hari bought a bottle of water and a falafel wrap garnished with onions and peppers and squirts of white and red sauce.

Then he headed to the park. Not many people were around at this time, as far as Hari could tell, but he was impressed by the park's size. Gentrification



V
PANDEMIC



CLAUDE CLAYTON SMITH

A FRESHER CLIME

. . . suppose
*Devouring pestilence hangs in our air
 And thou art flying to a fresher clime.*
 —Richard II, 1.3

I have come home for a while. The pandemic has closed the University. We have been returned to our parents, who don't want us either.



An email from Laura today. She sends her latest poem. Her images are brittle and delicate, yet they cut across the page like a Cossack's cry—pensive, tense, resplendent—all sensitivity and tact.

Laura is "stuck in Paris" due to Covid, on her junior year abroad. I am a great big senior, stuck at home. Where everything has stopped.

Tu me manques, she writes. I miss you, too.



The day is heavy and gray, legacy of this morning's storm. Summer-like thunder shook the first day of May after several days of sun. The lightning was unusually thin.

M'aidez! M'aidez! The climate is all out of whack.



This noon, while I was rereading Laura's email, a robin flew into the sun-porch screen with a chunky thud that startled me. Dazed, it glided to the fence, perched, hesitated, then dropped to the patio where, testing the flagstone, it recovered and hopped under the Adirondack chair to the forsythia bush. Later, having finished reading the letter, I noticed a noisy

robin on the arched rose trellis.

A metaphor here perhaps: Life as interrupted flight.
 The trellis needs a new coat of paint.



The pandemic has forced my father into early retirement, a less than golden handshake. The work he does is impossible from here. He slinks from room to room, avoiding me, strange mutual exiles that we are. Finely lined purple bubbles balloon from beneath his eyes. "The door is always open," he says, and does not question me.

My mother's world hasn't changed at all. It's just expanded by two. She calls Covid-19 the *Plandemic*, by which she means God's plan. "It's all in the Bible," she says. "*And great earthquakes shall be in divers places, and famines, and pestilences.* That's from Luke," she says, "21:11."



*Rich russet sun-ribbons twine
 themselves around
 dune oats and seaweed,
 gray gulls and orange-creased crabs.
 I walked on the watered edge
 of the sand and noticed the sunlight
 falling away to each side . . .*

From Laura's poem. I will reply with the suggestion to drop the *ed* on *walked* and *noticed* because there is no *ed* on *twine*.

Subtle image of the sunlight parting.



The cloudiness continues. In the back yard I notice a broken branch near the top of the maple tree, snapped by the storm. I take a ladder, a saw, and ascend. The leaves are wet. I jar the limbs and they shower me, as if in spite for intruding. I grip the trunk with one hand and saw away with the other. The shower mixes with sawdust and blinds me.

Later, the tree looks raped.

"Your father will appreciate that," my mother says. "He can't climb because of his back. All that surgery for a herniated disc. The tree will mend.

MICHAEL HETTICH

A SHARPER SHADOW

Sometimes when we sit without talking for a while
 the light seems to fall through the trees with a different
 sense of itself. What I mean is, I feel
 something of the *tenuous*, even in our silence,
 as though we were counting our breaths, preparing
 ourselves to let go of each other, maybe

sooner than we know. This ache feels more deeply
 interfused than love, though of course it is love too.
 I think what I mean is, it casts a sharper shadow
 than love, even love that lasts a lifetime. Maybe
 it's like a map of being, deeply-etched wood-grain,

or the way snow falls into a field of uncut grasses
 through the stillness of an afternoon: Something in that light
 moves into the shape of things and changes their contours
 as dusk rises to meet the sky—
 and the snow falls all night, to glow in the morning,
 trackless but shadowed by the gently-blowing grass.

CERTAIN HARMONIES

When I walk through our town these evenings, I imagine
 I can listen to my neighbors chattering inside
 their houses, recounting their days while they cook
 dinner, sip a cocktail, or watch TV.
 I've lived alone now for so many years
 I hardly talk to anyone, unless I'm explaining
 my troubles to the squirrels and the trees—and since
 I have few troubles, I mostly walk in silence.

Sometimes I venture out beyond our town,
 where the stars shine brighter and the animals are wild.

I stand still and try to remember who I was,
 but mostly I just listen to the music in my head,
 old love songs from the days when I felt like cliché
 could rise to revelation, a quiver in the voice
 at just the right moment
 was a baring of the soul.

Sometimes certain harmonies can seem to shape the world,
 I think, as a heron squawks up and flies off,
 darker than the darkness it disappears into.
 I still myself and try to hear the beating of its heart,
 the rush of the night through its wings. By the time
 I turn to walk home, most houses are silent

so I listen to the moths beat themselves against the streetlights,
 the songbirds breathe in the trees.



A MOMENT IN HISTORY



MK PUNKY*PANDEMIC (TRUST)*

When the pandemic paralyzed our world
 we all enjoyed an abundance of newly reclaimed time
 to evaluate the importance and necessity of our daily toils

When the pandemic paralyzed our world
 we all witnessed our richest and most powerful leaders
 stripped naked of pretensions

When the pandemic paralyzed our world
 we all confronted the strangely intimidating opportunity
 to consume less and create more
 reluctant sports fans learned to meditate
 liberated university students became autodidacts
 skeptical concertgoers began to look within
 husbands talked with wives
 long neglected books received the attention they craved
 senseless rushing from here to nowhere ceased
 slightly less war was waged
 trust was more valuable than oil

PANDEMIC (HOW LONG)

When the pandemic paralyzed our world
 we all asked ourselves
 How long could you go on like this?

Perspicacious scientists observed a startling correlation
 (and were careful to not call it causation)

According to the data
 those of us who had neglected to develop a robust inner life
 felt they might crack within twenty-four hours
 crazed from a lack of external stimuli

The ones who regularly looked within
 happily reported
 they could go on like this
 forever

4. *I Loved the Poetry of the Pandemic*

At least, I actually loved the poetry of the pandemic—
the phraseology of a virus shaped like a crown of colorful jewels,

to look over our rising horizon
and enter the land of social distancing, to even love

the music of that phrase—to regard the newness of words
in their turning context, to "shelter in place"

and be comforted by the new idea of home—
for me to stay domestic on Mandarin Lane in West Nyack,

in a spacious greenery, the forested nature
twenty miles north of Manhattan, to regard

the music and safety of my address. At least,
we still had shelter, we were not coughing, and society

had not collapsed overnight. At least, we were still
with our families. For the initial days, we were

only inconvenienced, helping to "flatten the curve."
Our lives, still nothing like the old saints

torn and rendered apart. We were still
only in the land of the bothered

and death happened to other people in other countries
or in the county next to ours, skirting closer.

5. *April as Depth*

My wife lost her job. My daughter lost
her job and her apartment. I read Daniel Dafoe's plague book,

whose uncle worked as a saddler—the same job as my grandfather
who survived the American Spanish Influenza a hundred years ago.

My multiple jobs stitched together to let me work "remotely"
for a continued paycheck and survival. And we were only

two weeks in, then three weeks in, a month of strangeness
in which the healthy were quarantined. After days, I felt dizzy,

a temptation to dizziness until I pushed it away,
thinking it's only psychological. When I went to bed tired

and woke up exhausted, I thought—only psychological.
Until the numbers crept closer to us, daily. Until we woke

to find ourselves the world's new epicenter of the pandemic—
with the highest number of deaths. Until we became numb

with death becoming a daily headcount, ascending exponentially.
A two-week stretch in April and then the days lost count—

losing track of which day it was, the only count becoming
how many died yesterday: in New York City, eight hundred people

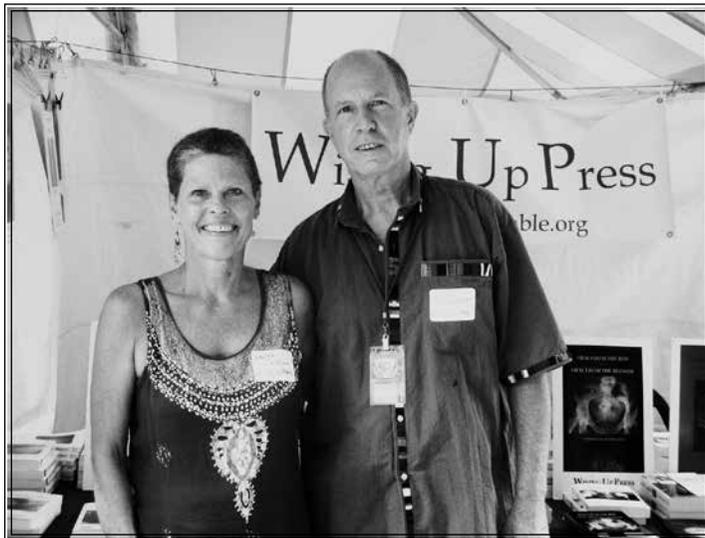
dying per day. Until we realized now that everything is personal—
whereas before, if something wasn't personal, it didn't exist.

What is both so ancient and contemporary as a plague?
Perversely, I read and watched histories of epidemics and contagion.

I marveled at the surprise of it, as if all this had never
happened before, when it's now happening to you.

Editors/Publishers

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