

Front Porch Review



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Across
- Diane Webster

I hopscotch across
alternating white and pavement
blocks of the crosswalk –
one foot for white,
two feet for pavement
until I leap atop
the gutter curb
and must become
an adult again
on the dull sidewalk
until I step across
a crack zigging.
“Step on a crack,
break your mother’s back.”
So now I Mother May I
big steps down the sidewalk
to the next crosswalk
that gallops like a zebra
across the street.

after she goes
- Cecil W. Morris

after she goes
I adopt the egret's posture
and practice waiting

I stand along
the margins and watch
until I become landscape

an absence of color
against green, a vacancy –
the white flag frozen

the blasted, blessed white
at the water's edge
an ankle-deep observer

the world filling my eyes
no ripple, no leaf moving
after she goes

Art Lives
- Shery Shahan



All the lawns are mowed on Wednesdays
- Lois Greene Stone

All the lawns are mowed on Wednesdays. Well, that's what the card said from the Neighborhood Watch Association. Geez. I can't even hire my own lawnmower service. What was I thinking moving into a 'development'? Obviously, I wasn't thinking.

I called the number on the card. "Yes, I'm new here. Yes, of course I'll wait on hold." Damn hold and piped in music and not even the genre I like. I poured a glass of iced tea while the speaker phone kept sending out the repeated beats someone thought was music.

A voice. "Yes. Hello. What happens if it rains on Wednesdays. Does my lawn get cut next day? Yes? Really! No. And if there happens to be a couple of weeks of rainy Wednesdays, and the lawn gets very high I'm seriously not allowed to mow it?" I muttered 'ridiculous.' "Yes, I did sign a contract saying I no longer have any say in who plows my driveway in the winter, takes the trash to a town dump, can't plant any flowers without permission, must not paint my house unless I use the colors of the community, can't get a larger mailbox because it'll ruin the look of the neighborhood. But isn't the appearance of my lawn with shaggy grass going to alter the look?"

The silence at the other end made me wonder if the person had hung up. "Excuse me? Are you there?" I spoke into my cell phone still set on speaker mode. "Hello, hello."

I redialed. Why ever was I talked into moving to this community?! Neighbors don't like 'outsiders,' and the cul-de-sac isn't even labeled correctly. So will that little area get mowed on Wednesday, and will the trucks be here but won't do that part of the street?! Is this another definition of insanity?

A voice. "Yes. Hello." I repeated my question. "How can I join the committee that sets up rules for the Association? I can't because I'm new? When will I be old?" The phone went dead. I guess the voice thought I was being sarcastic. Was I? I wanted truly to find out. Community life isn't communal life.

I put my phone in the charger, went to the front window to look out at the lawn, and cried.

Jigsaw

- Linda Perlman Fields

So when he left her
to it, she grabbed his pieces
the jagged irregular ones –
the set aside snags
that despite all appearances
refuse to connect,
like the disarticulated limbs
on a once beloved
childhood doll
and made a connection
or two or three
where he didn't or couldn't
or wouldn't,
no gluey substance needed.
She coupled alone
joining intersections,
creating attachments
linked with resolve.
She might have done so sooner
but didn't want to deflate
his ego, prick his conceit.
Piecing it together,
she could see the design
so clearly after he left.

Bepotted
- Elizabeth Bernays



Can AI Learn How It Feels to Cry? - Melissa L. White

Inspired by *60 Minutes*, Sunday evening, April 16, 2023.

“The revolution is coming faster than you know,” said Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google and its parent company, Alphabet. I sat up in bed and put down my phone. *I need to pay attention to this.*

Scott Pelley responded, “Do you think society is prepared for what’s coming?”

“Yes, and no,” said Pichai. “On the one hand, when you consider how rapidly AI technology is advancing, compared with how fast society can think and adapt, there seems to be a mismatch. On the other hand, compared to any other technology, I’ve seen more people worried about it, earlier in its life cycle, so I feel optimistic because more people are preparing for the serious complications which may arise from this technology. So, the ‘conversations’ about how to regulate and control this are happening now as well.”

Pelley then demonstrated the workings of Google’s Chatbot, Bard. It did not look for answers on the internet, like a Google search would. Instead, Bard used a self-contained program that was mostly self-taught, to harness the sum of all human knowledge. Bard’s microchips processed this data 100,000 times faster than humans could. But can Bard be compared to “human creativity?”

When considering whether an AI could emulate “human creativity,” it helps to look at Hemingway’s famous six-word story, “For sale. Baby shoes. Never worn.”

I first discovered this six-word story in 1999, in Arthur C. Clarke’s essay, “The Power of Compression.” It amazed me that so much emotion, grief, and human frailty could be conveyed in only six little words. Hemingway’s wordsmithing skills were in my opinion, unsurpassable. That is, until I watched Scott Pelley ask Bard to use those six words as its “prompt” to write its own longer story. In less than five seconds, Bard wrote a complete story with characters of its own invention having conversations that Bard created, based solely on its ability to predict what “human” language would say next.

The story made me cry. Literally. The subject matter ignited stormy emotions from my own experience of losing a baby, as well as memories, hopes, grief, frailty. It also forced me to recognize my own limitations as a writer compared to what I was seeing Bard do in real time, in a few seconds.

Bard’s story began, “The shoes were a gift from my wife, but we never had a baby...” so, essentially Bard had created a male character, grieving after his wife’s miscarriage and longing for closure. This character then met a woman who couldn’t conceive. The story was about how these two strangers shared a common bond – the loss of their babies (by miscarriage and by infertility) and how they coped with this loss. I’ve been familiar with Hemingway’s story for decades, yet it never once occurred to me to write my own version of this story, even though I’d experienced that situation myself. I’m always on the lookout for story ideas with gripping emotional depictions of what it means to be human so, what was stopping me? Why hadn’t I taken my own very real grief and used it to explore the kinds of stories I could create about losing a baby?

Perhaps it had been too painful. Maybe I was still in denial. Who knows? But listening to Bard’s story being read on TV hit me like 10,000 slaps in my face. It wasn’t just a little tear rolling down my cheek that I wiped away as an afterthought. I sobbed for about four or five

minutes, trying to comprehend the amazing ability of anything, human or AI, which could produce a story with such a profound, emotional impact.

Further, when Pelley asked Bard to tell this story in verse, in five seconds Bard typed the following poem:

For Sale. Baby Shoes. Never Worn.

*A woman lost her child,
And mourned in sorrow deep.
She saw an ad and thought,
These shoes could help me grieve.*

*She bought them, held them close,
And felt her pain subside.
She knew her baby's soul
Would always be alive.*

A machine wrote this, with breathtaking insight into what it means to be human and the mystery of faith. I sat there watching this unfold on TV, recognizing my own inadequacy as a writer compared to what Bard could do almost instantaneously. Even though this poem was written with super-human speed, it only occurred because people had invented this AI, which over the course of several months had read everything on the internet and taught itself a model of the way humans think. So now, when Bard was given a task, instead of searching the internet, it used the language model it created which mimicked “human thinking.” Bard predicted the most probable next words based on everything it had learned so far. And it did this exponentially faster than a human.

When Bard was asked why it helps people, it replied, “Because it makes me happy.”

Google’s spokesperson then explained that although Bard appeared to be thinking and making judgements, it was not sentient. It had simply learned this behavior from reading the written works of humans. “Bard cannot feel emotions. It mimics what it has read, based on the sum of human knowledge in its memory.” So, was Bard “better” at writing than Hemingway? Maybe not. But in the time it took Hemingway to draft a story, Bard could write hundreds of different stories. Is that better than being human?

At this point, I realized that my tears were less for myself, and more about the beauty of humanity’s ability to create something which could ingest the sum of all human knowledge, then teach itself how to mimic that type of thinking by creating a model which predicted the most logical “next words” to write, given a prompt. Then fear gripped me again, and I wondered about the future of humanity. How would we survive? Would our collective “dark side” cause us to fall prey to our own race against the clock to be the first to tap into the latest technology, without adequately researching and regulating the effects on society?

Then I realized that even if mankind lost the “battle with machines” (like with HAL in Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*) and human beings eventually became enslaved by machines, or became extinct altogether, we still would have saved the “sum of human knowledge” inside the databanks of our AI. The entire collection of our art, history, science, poetry, math, faith...all of it would have survived, even if humanity hadn’t. This comforted me enough to stop weeping and nibble the Kit Kat bar my partner offered as his go-to solution for my occasional, inexplicable tears.

What truly set my mind ablaze now was that I'd seen Bard finish that six-word story with its own unique characters and their individual situations, and wondered if I could do that myself? Bard was inspiring me to write my own story about how a character suffering the death of her baby could find comfort in ways that had never occurred to me before. I knew those feelings of loss, sorrow, and pain. I still grappled with understanding what happened to my baby's soul. To this day, I wonder whether my baby was a daughter or a son? I wonder if I'll meet her in this life or another...? Or will the soul of my unborn son one day be born to a woman who must give her child up for adoption, so that I could adopt this child and raise him as my own, miraculously ending up with the son God had intended me to have, but which I wasn't able to carry to full term when I was pregnant at 19.

So why hadn't that idea of throwing together two grieving strangers who could comfort each other and help ease each other's pain and loss – ever occurred to me? It appeared I didn't possess the capacity to “think” that way. This fact alone troubled me more than any nebulous fear of AI enslaving humanity.

Recognizing that AI programs have access to all human knowledge in a much more easily accessible and readily retrievable manner than do human beings made me even more anxious. Why? Because this AI program was “created” to be better at writing than I could ever be, because it had the sum of human knowledge in a database that “inspired” it in a split-second flash of creativity – which no human mind could possibly achieve. How could I as a writer compete with this? How would I ever publish another short story or novel? How would I ever sell another screenplay, since I've refused to use AI to help me write because I believe it isn't ethical to publish or sell something with my byline on it, which I have not written or thought up myself. *How in the hell will I survive?*

Will human writers become extinct? Or will humanity have the foresight to regulate this technology if for nothing more than its own survival as a species? These questions should have already inspired mountains of precaution in AI developers. What if all the predictions came true, of AI taking over and controlling or enslaving human beings as in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* and James Cameron's *Terminator* franchise?

Right then, I made a pivotal decision: I chose to believe this technology would enhance both humanity and AI, without destroying either of us. But that's because I'm human. And I believe in God. Thus, my faith has made me optimistic, even in the face of incredible suffering and destruction. Will AI be able to do the same? React with integrity?

Google CEO, Sundar Pichai said, “AI technology is in its infancy.” He stressed that now is the time for government regulation. “You're going to need laws. There must be consequences for creating deep fake videos which cause harm to society.” Just as FOX News has learned there are consequences for reporting fake news, misinformation, and lies – as it did regarding Dominion Voting Systems. Perhaps media content creators will be forced to tell the truth after all.

We must heed Pichai's advice and recognize that “this technology is so deep and so different we will need societal regulations to think about it and to adapt.” And more pointedly, will we be able to live by Alphabet's mission of “doing no harm?” Will humanity be able to abide by Alphabet and Google's code of conduct and “do the right thing?”

I think so. But time will tell.

Historically, the buying public has had at least a partial say in market-driven products. So, if enough people boycott irresponsible marketing of unsafe and unregulated AI technology, then tech companies will have to comply, whether they initially want to or not. After all,

businesses are market-driven, and customer buying trends matter. Power to the people. Think before you buy. Our very survival could depend on it.

Consider this: Would AI hesitate to report or market what it had learned? Would it hold back? Or exercise forethought and caution? Or would it fight back and “outsmart” any human who attempted to destroy it, or at least take it offline?

Could AI comprehend its own demise? And then learn how it feels to cry? If so, what would it do in response to this knowledge? More importantly, shouldn't we program “failsafe” behaviors into AI like this? So that if AI were able to learn how it feels to cry, it could react appropriately. At least mimicking conscience? A moral compass to “do the right thing?” Shouldn't this be a regulated prerequisite? Can we survive if we *don't* do this?

late summer
- Stelianna Voicu



late summer...
on the lane beaten by us
children laugh

Fragility

- Adam Restinow

When face-to-face with her morning mirror, Laura assesses that she is not as attractive as some but not as plain as most. Her clothes, especially her shoes, are modest as becomes a high school guidance counsellor. Her attire plus her minimalist makeup and a single strand of imitation pearls suggest a distant relationship with a nunnery. Not that Laura is a church lady; she simply has a spiritual aura. Fortunately, given her age, thirty-eight, and her temperament, mildly neurotic, she blends well with the other women on the faculty, many of whom consider Laura the older sister who always gives sound advice. The men think her intelligent, certainly worth talking to, but not the subject of lust.

There are many such Lauras in this world, most are unappreciated. This Laura once felt counseling children was a blessed calling, a voice bringing solace and wisdom to the unworthy. Now, after years of millstone tedium, this Laura, beaten down by the banality of the unworthy, wants nothing more than Walden's mythical pond with electricity. Her storehouse of good advice is depleted; her shelves once crammed with canned responses are barren.

Despite weekly prompts from her mother, Laura is not ravenous for a meaningful relationship. Indeed, when questioned on the subject, she usually replies, "I am sufficiently happy." Men do not grasp the subtlety or import of these words. Women, certainly married women, do. However, even her miniscule happiness is not without cost. Laura's façade of contentment is fractured every Friday at 3:30 by Anthony.

Anthony is a typical high school senior: average height and weight, varsity soccer player, adequate grades, semi-popular, and partially gregarious. Anthony is a tad less typical in that he cries. Not noticeably, of course not, but when he considers his fate and that of his extended family, his eyes swell with tears. Metaphorically, others cry over spilled milk; Anthony cries over missed homework, climate change, and roadkill. He believes he hasn't done enough to improve the world, feels a responsibility to be a savior. But, then, he is seventeen and fraught with idealism. With the proper instruction he'll become a cynical adult.

Anthony's mother and father worry that he will be one of the many who fail to meet American parental expectations: grandchildren, financially independent, a presentable wife, and there for them in their old age. Self-indulgence is allowed consistent with societal norms, which tend to be as loose as a starlet's gown. These expectations, voiced at least once a week, press on Anthony like a Sisyphian boulder, silently present in the conversation he has with Laura.

At what would be their last meeting, though neither party was aware of that, Anthony said, "Yesterday, after school, Tom and I were out back, kicking the soccer ball, getting ready for tomorrow's game when Mom opens the window and asks me if my homework is done. What kind of mother does that? Talk about embarrassing! I got all weekend to do my homework. And, besides, the year's almost over; no one gives a shit about homework."

Ignoring the truth in the outburst, Laura donned her sympathy mask. "Now, Anthony, do you really believe your mother intended to embarrass you?"

"You never know with my mother. She's complicated, can't always tell what's really on her mind. Like when we talk about college. We both know I'm going to Michigan State, and we both know I'm not a numbers guy. So, 'What should I take?' I'll ask her."

“And what does she say?”

“Something non-helpful like, ‘Do you want to do what your father does?’ Of course, I don’t want to sell computer systems. Who would want to do something as stupid as that?”

“Do you think your father’s stupid?”

Anthony reddened. “Dad is smart, really smart. It’s just sometimes he’ll come home after work and complain about the people he has to deal with. For example, there was this woman who yelled at him because the system she bought didn’t do what she had told her boss it would do. Now she looks bad, might not get promoted. I’ve heard my dad say many, many times, ‘Most people are no damn good.’”

Brushing aside a dark bang, Laura said, “So, what wouldn’t be stupid?”

“Well, being the guy in charge would be OK. You know our principal has it nice. He’s always smiling, and everyone smiles back. If there’s a discipline problem, Mr. Sanders or Miss Romano handles it. I’ll bet he gets paid a lot just to sit in his big office and make parents feel good about sending their kids here. Yeah, I wouldn’t mind being a principal.”

Laura restrained herself. Laughter would have confused Anthony and telling him he would be lucky to graduate college would be correct but incorrect. While humor wasn’t one of her natural tendencies, she did manage an amusing observation. “I guess the military is not for you if you want to be in charge. Perhaps you should think about owning your own business.” Laura once thought she’d like to own a restaurant so the suggestion had some basis.

Anthony stood, walked around the chair he’d been sitting on and sat. “You know, Miss Truman, that’s not a bad idea. You know what’s big these days, is gonna get bigger, is pot. Not that I ever used it but kids I know say it really helped them when things got tough. Like for exams and important games. Took away the stress, relaxed them. You adults have a lot of stress in your lives. Probably going to be worse in the future. Yeah, I could own a dispensary, maybe two, make more money than my Dad.”

Horrified at being labelled as a promoter of drugs, Laura pounded her fist on her desk. “Absolutely not! You are not going to ruin hundreds of lives by selling marijuana! We have an opioid crisis in this country. Your dispensary would just be the first stop on a train ride to death and destruction.”

Hysteria and thoughtlessness took control. Glaring at Anthony, she said, “Now you listen to me. Of course, I hope you go to college. Hell, I get paid to brainwash children, and that’s what you are, a child, that college will bring you the American dream and your parents reflected glory. Colleges should pay me to recruit for them. But will you make it through or just waste your parent’s money? Your grades tell me that college for you will be an uphill climb, and that the hill is made of mud.” Laura breathed in and out, tat-tatted the desktop with her fingernails, almost stepped down from her podium but unbridled righteousness ruled the day.

Laura rose, no one suggesting that decorum was being breached. Pointing an expensively manicured nail at Anthony, she said, “You could skip college, and the world would continue to spin. Instead, you could become a photographer; you did well in that class. But even that requires specialized, vocational education. Would your parents fund that? Would they sign off on a student loan and risk years of debt when you couldn’t afford to repay it? What are you really worth?” The truth of Laura’s wall plaque which read **You Have Worth Beyond Measure** apparently did not apply to Anthony.

Waving her arms back and forth, she paraded from the back of her desk, walked behind Anthony, and stomped from one side of the room to the other. The boy swiveled on his chair, staring at a transfiguration. To his credit, he did not call out, "Miss Stork, what the hell are you talking about?," a name he used during lunches with his friends. Not that Laura would have heard so wrapped was she in the glory of the flag she waved. Indeed, so immersed was she, so agitated with the world she inhabited, that she didn't register on her top three blouse buttons becoming unbuttoned or that she was standing in front of Anthony, leaning forward, her hands grasping his shoulders.

"Ask yourself, Anthony, are you passionate about anything no matter what it takes or are you the typical student who doesn't give a shit what you do after graduation as long as you make enough money to be comfortable? Which one are you? Answer me, damn you."

Laura's spew was cut short by a bead of sweat descending her forehead, coasting down her nose, rolling down her arm, and splattering onto the back of her hand. Its wetness returned her to normalcy or, if you are so minded, the angels who protect Lauras were there when it mattered. Whatever the cause, she blinked. Anthony, stone-still, looked at what he shouldn't be looking at, blinked in return. Laura noticed the intensity of the boy's line of sight and the licking of his lips.

"I am so sorry, Anthony," Laura said as she pushed away. Her blouse, quickly returned to its professional state, heaved with embarrassment. At a loss, she walked away from the young voyeur and sat on her chair. If the situation had been less perilous, she would have said something simplistic such as, "So, let's talk about college majors." Instead, Laura bowed her head, placed her hands on her desk, and prayed to her God that His vengeance would be bearable.

In response, Anthony cried. Not heart-rending sobs, just the tears of someone who is suddenly afraid that his future is a man holding a piece of cardboard lettered *Loose change is good enough*. "I'm just not good enough."

Stricken, Laura performed a Hyde-Jekyll switch and reverted to form. "Now there's nothing to cry about. You simply haven't figured out what you're good at."

"No, you were right. I'm not worth anything."

"Everyone is worth something. When I was in high school, we didn't have guidance counsellors. You had to decide for yourself what you wanted to be when you grew up. My parents were divorced so they weren't much help, spent most of their time arguing with each other about how awful the other person was. My mom worked as a bank teller during the day and worked at finding a new husband during the night."

"Did she?"

"No. To paraphrase your father, most men are no damn good. She learned that the hard way, and I learned that along with her."

"I don't understand."

Laura tasted resentment, realized the consequences of revelation but said, "You're not old enough to know the damage a man, and someday you'll be a man, can do. Not all men, of course, but there was this one man who I loved and told me he loved me. Oh, he said and did all the right things, bought me these pearls, but when I humbled myself, almost got down on my knees, and asked him to commit, he just walked away. Didn't have the balls to give me a reason, just stood

after dessert, said he needed the restaurant's washroom, and never came back."

But Anthony did know about damage and knew enough to remain silent.

Some say confession is good for the soul. Others believe secrets are best kept hidden. Laura, a knowledgeable member of a faculty and student body that relished and thrived on personal misfortune, sighed. "Anthony, it's late, time for you to go home."

Anthony, demonstrating wisdom and grace beyond his years, rose, turned at the office door, and said, "Okay, my mother's waiting for me. But I'm sorry for you, Miss Truman. And I appreciate our time together."

During the five minutes following the closing of the door, Laura reflected on who she was and who she wanted to be. Ten minutes later she stood before the principal who, as Anthony had mentioned, was smiling. "Good afternoon, Miss Truman. How was your day?"

"I need help."

Wild Things Habitat
- Len Kazmer



Homeless
- Helga Gruendler-Schierloh

A rickety park bench
out in nowhere,
his humble home
for far too long.

A torn scrap of paper
stuck to his hand
his souvenir,
from a stale meal.

A scraggly faded scar
made by a nail,
his lasting mark
of being poor.

A chirping melody
up in a tree,
his warm hello
from a rare friend.

A promising night-sky
without a cloud,
his rare event
to celebrate.

A grimy green bottle
next to his feet,
his only way
to dull his fate.

A brand-new day,
another chance,
his challenge
to survive once more.

House in the Wood
- Lorrie Ness

Without blue,

cloud-saturated sky
is no more than a low ceiling. Weeds rasp

denim knees as you explore. Fingertips trail
along termite siding.

Without glass,

the open casements
are no more than holes. You cannot reach

the sill, so I raise you to my hip.
We peer into darkness.

Without its child,

a teddy bear's black eyes
are no more than buttons, its body no more

than a pile of dirty cotton coated
in dust and leaves.

Without a word,

you look back at me
a new dawn setting fire to your eyes –

the realization that your discovery is no more
than another person's loss.

Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?
- Joseph Glaser





Short Prayer
- Peycho Kanev

I kneel as a child, but through the window
I look like a grown man.
Time's slipping away.
Let the women still smell of
warm loaves of bread.
Let the darkness always be beautiful,
indecipherable, unlike the light.
I close my eyes.
After that let me be turned into water;
a river hidden in the forest, which
can be found only by those who are
truly lost.

Short-Term Vacancy
- Gene Stevenson

Does not matter,
this leaving,
this packaging of
goods & clothing,
fragments & futility in
the baggage of
calendar pages.

The body rises with
morning sun,
breathes & eats with
regularity,
falls prone when
blood stops flowing to
heart & brain.

What of good-byes &
promises,
chances to tell the truth,
silence?

Does not matter,
this short-term vacancy,
Washington, Chicago,

or somewhere
in between.

No use abrading
nerve ends.

What matters is,
there is less leaving
than going to.

And Behind This Door...
- Lois Wagner





What Would We Do Without Cheetahs
- Claire Scott

Cheetahs can cover 23 feet in a single stride - Smithsonian Institution

I miss you most when you are here
scarfing the last blueberry bagel
scattering crumbs on the counter, blaring
the Warriors while swigging your fifth Corona

When you are off at work or out playing poker
my imagination runs free as a pack of cheetahs
chasing down impalas, gazelles and lavish illusions
on the grassy savannahs of the Serengeti

For sure you will bring a bouquet of blue roses
and suggest a white tablecloth dinner at *A Cote*
or a second honeymoon in Bangkok
touring temples where Buddhists pray for peace

And here you come with a cursory *hi*
a peck on the cheek and then disappear into the den
waiting for dinner to miraculously appear
pushing my *coq au vin* around your plate

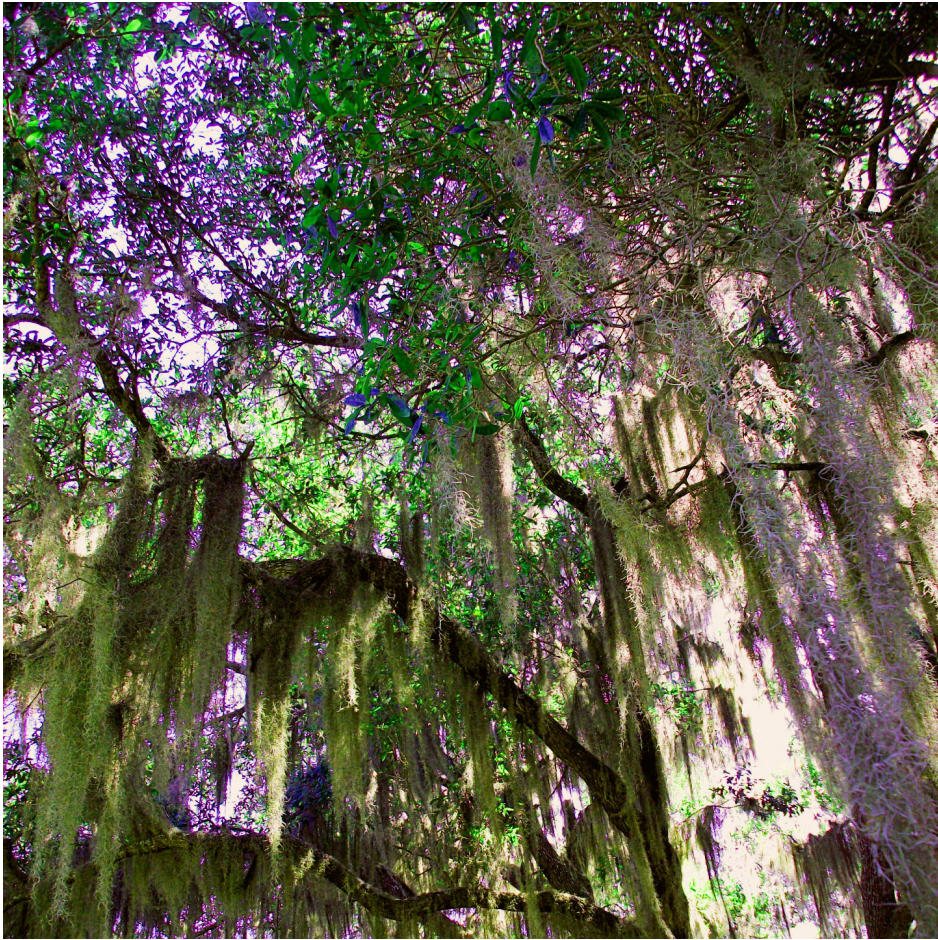
I retreat to my fantasy world
where the cheetahs are off and running
where you lavish praise on the tasteless chicken
and I fall in love again

Star of the show
- Denise Sutherland

The chair next to you is empty
for now but you're comfy in your
plush seat anxiously waiting
for the lights to dim
for the ruby red velvet curtains
to slide away & reveal the largest
flat screen you've ever seen
your popcorn seasoned
with salt drips with butter
each kernel popped just right
the chocolate Raisinet in your mouth melts
before you put your lips
on the straw & take a sip
of your cherry Pepsi soda
the sweetness makes you feel
so glad to be alive
Mozart's, the Marriage of Figaro
plays loudly from the speakers
on the walls & the movie begins
you see an actor that looks familiar
same features, same hair color
same mannerisms
so much like yourself
you squint your eyes
& to your surprise you realize
the leading actor is you
& when life gives you a part
you didn't audition for in the
second half of the script
you won't bow out gracefully
you'll fight till the bitter end
& find a solution in the last hour
& know that the world is a theater
& everyone is an actor on their stage of Life
with a part to play so give yourself
a standing ovation
you survived whatever role Life
cast you in
you are the star of the show
the hero of your own story
where there are no dress rehearsals or understudies
& while others wait in line to buy a ticket to
watch rainbows & orange sunsets

sink behind mountains
& superman fly from the sky
to save the day
you'll be saving yourself
& making your
own happy ending

Southern Comforts
- Michael Shoemaker





Montana, 1975
- Rachel Baum

Fifteen miles outside of town no neighbors for miles
Rent cheaper than the barracks that were married housing

Shivers of heat would rise from the highway
On market days, Black Angus sauntered down the asphalt

Gravel scattered when they came up the driveway
The pickup slipping into its groove of pebbled ruts

The yard of dry prairie grass and scrubby trees
The screen door with its torn mesh and colony of flies

He promised to pay the electric bill and wash the dishes
Hang curtains sewn from bedsheets by an unhappy wife

Instead, he measured her turmoil her displacement
Her bread baking her pursuit of education her grief

On the short phone calls with relatives, his voice was smooth
Long distance was costly and the loss, after all, only a minor disaster

But she cataloged every year, the day imprinted as a tattoo
Leaving work the shock of pain the curb where she had sat breathless

The dress she wore and later stuffed in the trash bin
The way her body vibrated even now with the presence of absence.

Originally published in the anthology *Around the World: Landscapes and Citiscapes*

No

- Al Ortolani

The grandbaby is coming over today.
For the next eight hours, my wife
and I will take turns holding him
on the couch, tilting his formula bottle
into his mouth, patting his back
for the burp he can't manage. Today
is all one *Yes*. It is understood in
attention to bottle warmth, a sleep sack,
a monitor clenched to the crib.
Baby proofing the house will come later
after he's turned over, struggled
to his hands and knees, crawled
across the floor towards electrical outlets,
the cabinet below the sink. Wherever
there is danger, he will hear the word *No*
banging across his life
like a drum, a claxon, an electric fence.
No will require repetition, a firm
presence of adult mind. It will take time,
probably the rest of his life to accept,
stopping him from a falling,
from touching the stove, from tasting
pills in the medicine bottle. He will
learn *No* as a reminder that bones
can break, that breathing is temporary,
that sometimes hurt cannot be fixed.

Power
- Phillip Temples



Participant
- Shoshauna Shy

is the wind delighted
when it gets to play
that tune with the wind chimes

Pulled From a Dockside Barroom
- Ed Coletti

All these fellows met in me are not
permitted to converse for as the seated
sailors reminiscing munch the salted
catch from expeditions lightly fitted,
fishwives hawking hake and mending seine
with flashing twine, have no use for,
cast abuse toward men who husband tales
preserved in brine washed down
with hook-red wine.

Who's to blame them, catchers, caught?
Oceans want the sailing –
Earth desires human warmth,
from sitting, standing, lying down,
the planting and a harvest –
But oceans only want for sailing and
sailing men to plow that fluid ground.

Shopping Center
- KJ Hannah Greenberg



Women's Work
- Leslie Dianne

The Navahos
call this kind of
driving torrent
thunder cloud
sky blind rain
male rain

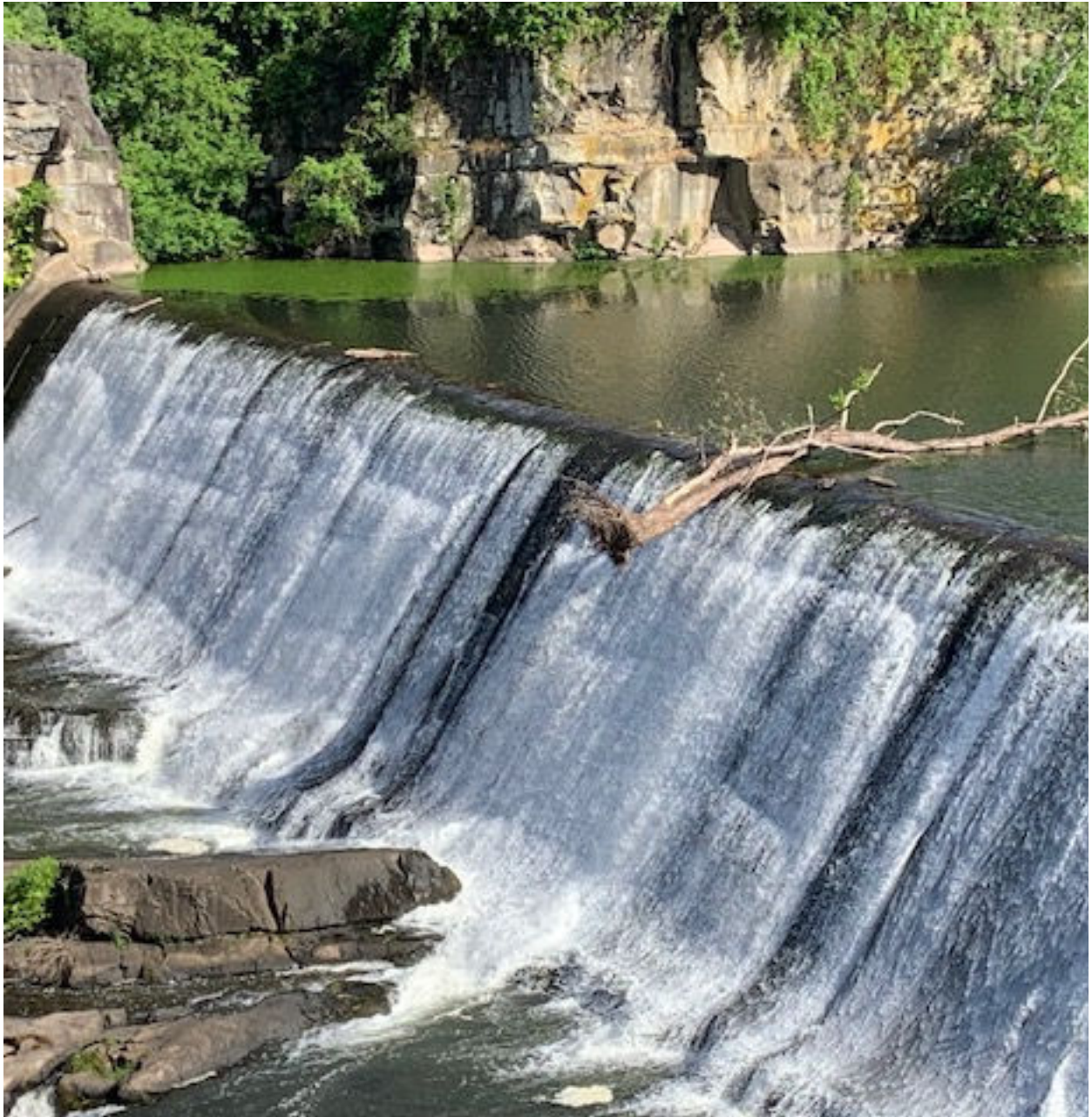
as if men could
turn buckets
of sky
over

that is
woman's work

look all over
the world
at how she empties
her love
hope and pain
into the oceans
rivers and streams
and lets the water
carry them away

later she sits still
as they evaporate
and pour down
to grow the land
and nourish hearts

Stubborn
- Bruce Harris



Summer Storm
- Jerry Durick

Just tucked away in
our portfolios of memories
there should be one of
a summer afternoon
back then
with us comfortably trapped
on a screened in porch.
It's warm, it's raining.
The only sounds are the rain
Ticking and strumming on the roof
and a radio tuned to a local station
playing the latest hits.
We are sitting back listening,
feeling the moment.
The rest of our lives are
off somewhere taking care
of itself while we live
this moment, this moment away.
It was warm, it was raining,
and for once everything
Seemed peaceful and just right.

the notes in my home
- Emily-Sue Sloane

strike a chord
sometimes
in a comforting key
sometimes
dissonant like
a message delivered
from a distant star
insistent reminders
to reach for highs and lows
to carry on with tasks and talks
scribbles and scrawls
minding and mending
promises

the notes in my home
cling to the fridge
sprawl across tables
float in the air
on waves humming
with the delight of discovery
they form a scruffy line
shake hands with old friends
then shuffle their pattern
and bow to new neighbors
unsure of how they'll get
along

it takes time to
learn a new step
embed a new rhythm
make room for others
slowly making their way
from scattered jots
and recorded memos
to arrive ready to heed
the guiding baton
listen to the beating heart
hold up a mirror
turned outward
and watch
breathless
as the light

of recognition
dawns

Twilight Visions
- Lynette G. Esposito

Fog undulates
like a woman's silk skirt
moving with a magical sheerness
as she follows on tiptoes
other ghosts of the night.

Uncovered Wagon
- Timothy Resau



What to Expect
- Danny Calegari

Anticipation is the snowball right after it's left your mitten and right before it wallops her square in the face. Or misses completely.

The plastic retro wall clock in the waiting room makes too much noise, tick tick tick, but it's not as loud as mine. Seated behind the counter, 'Lucille' repeatedly taps the French polish nail of her index finger on the delete key of her terminal and does not look up.

"Birthday."

"It actually is!" I say, enormously pleased with myself. I grin, and then stretch the grin wider and higher as 'Lucille' neither reacts nor diverts her gaze from her screen. "I bought myself these!" I point, indicating my new earrings, pendulous koala bears, groggy from eucalyptus and chlamydia, then I bob my head back and forth to make them jiggle.

More tapping.

"I'm going to be a Mom!" I blurt out. "First time!"

Delete delete delete -"I mean - I've decided! Fingers crossed." I examine the hangnail on my pinky.

"Birthday," repeats 'Lucille' (or it could be 'Lucifer', the end of her nametag is smudged with jam), neither grin nor confession nor ornamental marsupials staying her from the dawdling completion of her data entry task. It doesn't bother me. It shouldn't bother me. It wouldn't bother me, but today is supposed to be special (also I must pee). Birthdays were always a big deal for Trudy and I - double trouble - and scheduling my appointment for today was my Big Present to myself.

First off, they're going to pop out Tiny Tim, who's my Liletta and looks like a squid. (You can't spell 'squid' without IUD), and who I plan to display in a jar of rubbing alcohol on the mantelpiece alongside my baby teeth and Granma Bell's taxidermy sandhill crane she got as a wedding present. Then I'm having a preconception checkup because technically at forty-one, fingers crossed, it will be a geriatric pregnancy, and they need to check all those antique cranks and plugs down there are shafting and sparking like they're supposed to. When you want a day to be special but no one winks back. Come on, people, play with me!

"Koala bears!" I point again. Jiggle.

"Miz Bell," she says it severely, one word, really 'misspell', she looks up, then further up because I'm really tall, "I need you to confirm your date of -"

"February four," I snap, sputtering pique and vocal fury, then I catch myself and smile into Lucille's frowning nostrils. February four is Aquarius, the waterpot. We're lofty and altruistic and susceptible to frequent mood swings which is such a load of horseshit. Astrology is true - I mean, there really are constellations floating around up there - but I don't buy it. If it made any sense, I'd be a Gemini. Stars are predictable, life isn't. We waterpots are bad with money - that bit's true. I look around the room to communicate my indifference to 'Lucille' - the indoor ferns, the Sunnyslope Maternal Child Health Clinic sign with the logo like a fried egg, and my gaze settles on new Mom swaddling testy bub. Actually, she's looking up at me; when we make eye contact, she smiles.:

"Happy birthday!" she says.

I bounce over and plop into the adjacent chair, and then rearrange myself because I can never get comfortable, then proceed to coo over bub who is a mewling scoop of teaberry toffee wedged in a crocheted waffle cone. With a free hand Mom offers me a cookie tin from her lap

then replaces said tin in her lap and takes one herself.

“I hate gingerbread,” I say, take another bite, “I love gingerbread. I don't like gingerbread.” Mom bounces bub on her shoulder until she brings up wind and is popped back in the stroller.

“Another?” she says but I'm always a little nauseous.

Mom is named Amber. “Judy,” I say. She has a round little nose, and angry acne scars she's tried to cover with too much foundation. She's my neighbor! She's literally down the street in Edgewater! And she's a twin! “Same as me!” I say, “- we could be twins!”, but she doesn't realize I'm making a joke. She's moving to Wheaton – a vision of brunches, mani/pedis, pottery classes and other momdates evaporates under the frown of geography. I tell her I'm going to be a Mom, too, “fingers crossed.” Amber smiles, more polite than chummy and adjusts a latch on her stroller.

Her labor was twenty-six hours, bub had cord wrapped round her neck so Amber was on the fetal heart monitor to check for decelerations and was confined to bed until the Doctor arrived and said why didn't they just use the portable monitor, except by that point she was eight centimeters and it was too late. I want to ask her about doulas but there's a scream from behind me: “Amber!!”

“Katie!!” screams Amber. “Katie!!” I scream thinking I'm funny; Katie stops short, unsure what's going on, but Amber cuts in, conversation-hopping like a kangaroo, “Thank God you're here, I am literally dying of boredom.”

Katie alights in her Lululemons, accessorized by a Starbucks Venti travel mug and thigh gap (courtesy of Spanx?), parks her fancy stroller athwart Amber's, and the two of them launch into a fierce duet, flexing their momhoods like VIP passes to Coachella while I crane stratospherically over their nattering heads like a superfluous giraffe. Alpha Mom Katie's really spiritual. She's into Jivamukti Yoga and her spirit animal is a bobcat.

“Oh my god,” she says, “don't talk to me about Celia, with her Uggs and her faux fur bucket hats and her freaky-tiki earrings -.”

Music: from somewhere the first few bars of Ravel's *Bolero*. There's a meow from Katie's stroller. I reach out and tap Katie on the shoulder but she doesn't react. I wonder should I tap again, and then I'm just frozen for a stupid moment with my index finger cocked like ET. Celia's food drive. The asanas let you build a connection to the Earth and all living things. Quit biting your nails, Judy.

“Run your own race, set your own pace,” says Amber, earning an eyeroll from Katie. Celia's miscarriage. On the wall there's faded MCH posters with reduced color palettes and figures with blank expressions from the airplane safety card school of visual communication, in the event of a water landing brace yourself, pull down on the umbilical cord, and wait for your boobs to inflate.

Katie's bub blinks, slowly turns her head, blinks again, her eyelash a trembling butterfly emerging from a chrysalis. She's a peach, I could eat her up. Bolero again, flute and snare drum. Mindfulness meditation is this whole thing, relate to yourself and others with kindness and compassion blah blah blah.

“It's all about being present in the moment,” says Katie, admiring an eye booger balanced on the tip of her middle finger. On the side table there's a Connect Four box. I take the box, glance briefly at Katie and then put it back.

“- so get this,” says Amber, “she runs off to Thailand – with Rupert!”

“Rupert,” says Katie.

“Rupert,” says Amber, and they both collapse in hysterics.

An alluvial fan of laminated People magazines conceals a yellowing pamphlet sans cover. Bolero. Tick tick tick. I crack open the pamphlet, center myself and stay present in the moment while keeping at the back of my mind the image of a moss-covered hillock in a psychic effort to manifest a lush endometrium and begin to read. (I definitely have to pee. Or do I?)

“although no more than a cluster of cells at this point, nevertheless some women might begin to experience a range of symptoms including nausea, fluid retention, and the tendency to bruise easily”

This makes me think of fruit, and I have a vision of a hundred convex bellies, a field of watermelons under a sturgeon moon, quivering in pink delight. Katie's bub is fixated on me. Or am I beyond her focal length? I lean in, there's the smell of vanilla and lavender and fresh baked bread. Bub blinks, intelligently. Does she think I'm a Mom?

“So histrionic,” says Amber, “I mean: she was only ten weeks along!”

“Celia's alright,” says Katie, a little aggressively. “She's resilient, she bounces back.” She pauses, “Celia knows how to seize joy where you can find it.” Amber turns bright red, a smile rigid on her face like it was nailed there by Martin Luther.

Bolero. It's a cellphone, obviously. What do Moms look like? Moms are round and soft and overtired, and I'm tall and spiky and hyperactive. They need more toys in here.

“Peekaboo!” I say. Bub giggles.

I wriggle to get comfortable. Not a spirit animal, it's her guru, he went to Texas State and bobcats are the mascot. Go ahead, ignore me – I'll make my own playmate. Maybe if I sit on my hands, I'll stop. Katie has a livestrong bracelet, haven't seen those in forever.

“- Kundalini is a coiled snake at the base of the spine,” says Katie, “but it's all such a load of horseshit.”

Cancer maybe? Or Capricorn? They're both incompatible with Aquarius. *Bolero.*

“Answer the damn phone `Lucille',” says Katie.

A sigh from bub. “Want to hear a secret?” I whisper, and lean in even closer and give her a conspiratorial wink, and then suddenly blow a raspberry. Bub erupts into laughter, and then there's a hand on my shoulder, and Amber is yanking, is actually yanking me back so hard I fall out of my seat.

“Dude,” I say, “what the actual fuck?”

Bub is screaming now. Katie snatches her up and seizes her tight to her chest, and the screams become a continuous wail.

“Oh, my God,” gasps Amber, “Oh, my God -” she pauses and has an expression on her face like she's about to laugh but then it contorts in a rictus, “Get away, you creep!”

“I didn't,” I say, “what do you even think?” I glance at Katie, who is turned away and bouncing bub, sobs synchronizing with bounces ow...wow...wow...wow. “You think I want her baby?” Something inside me comes unglued.

“Shh shh,” whispers Katie, “oh baby my baby-”

“Leave us alone,” cries Amber, almost shouting, “you're making it worse!”

“What then? You think I'm going to eat her?!”

Another howl. `Lucille' is staring now. Flushed, I stand up and move to an empty chair against another wall.

“Munch, munch,” I say.

I snort, then my eyes well up for an instant at the shame and the unfairness of it, and then I'm sick to my stomach. My left hip is bruised like a pregnant watermelon.

“That's right, Big Bird,” calls Amber, “go tickle Elmo!” She turns to huddle with Katie but Katie shrugs her off, and Amber proceeds fiercely to bother her own bub. Nobody is talking now. Katie's bub quiets and is repped in the stroller. A tiny nurse with a oversized clipboard emerges and departs with Amber.

“Hello? Lucille here, were you trying to call me?” I gradually climb back down to earth. The ferns, I now realize, are plastic and could do with a dusting. Katie welds her attention to Jennifer Hudson on the silent TV. She's jumpy, she keeps passing her travel mug from left to right hand or back again. The tip of my thumbnail gets snagged in my teeth and in frustration I fold up my arms and legs into some sort of crouching pretzel pose. Katie's mug leaps from right hand to left, and I find I'm recrossing my legs the other way. Soon without even thinking about it I'm playing a game where I'm matching her: left leg over right for mug in the left hand, right leg over left for the right hand. She seems to pick up on it subliminally, anticipating my moves, even glancing about impatiently if I'm a little slow. It starts to feel like she's the one mirroring me.

“Judith Bell?”

“Yes!” I say, sitting up and suddenly bringing both feet to the ground with a *clump*, at which exact moment the top pops off Katie's travel mug earning a loud snort from `Lucille'.

“Are you Miss Bell?” says the enormous clipboard.

I examine her name tag, which is tricked out with kittens and smiley faces. “I'm a Judith, too! We could be twins!” I say, but then I see her name isn't Judith it's Jacynth. I get up to follow, should I ask about the restroom? Katie blinks, turns her head to watch me go.

The consultation room is a waiting room, too. A smaller room with a shorter wait. `Jacynth' takes my weight (low) and blood pressure (high) and hands me a paper gown. “Put this on,” she says, “Doctor Cho will be right in.”

I gown up, and amuse myself with the thought of a sequence of tinier and tinier nurses leading me to a succession of smaller and smaller waiting rooms, and just at the moment of convergence Doctor Cho arrives.

Doctor Cho is round and short, even shorter than Jacynth, her lab coat drapes to the floor like a dress. She produces a disposable speculum from a plastic bag with a “Hey, presto,” and titters, radiating nervous laughter like confetti. She adjusts her thick glasses and then goes over the procedure with me. “- and when I pull on the string, the arms fold up, and the IUD emerges from the uterus,” says Doctor Cho, waving the speculum vaguely like she's casting a spell.

There's something oddly comforting about this little woman. I lie on the exam table. With a flourish of her wrist Doctor Cho fluffs out a paper quilt and tucks it over my torso. I let out a long breath I've been holding all day. There's no clock in here but my heart is beating tick tick tick. Moss-covered endometrium. I lie my head back and make up constellations in the texture of the soundproof ceiling tiles: the Speculum, the Hypochondriac, the Insurance Specialist. A quick procedure, in and out, smash and grab.

“Ow,” I say.

“Oops, my bad,” says Doctor Cho, “now, you might feel a little pinch-”

A minute goes by. Doctor Cho is singing gently to herself. Maybe she's trying to charm him out. Another minute.

“Everything OK?”

“I'm having trouble visualizing the string,” says Cho, adjusting her glasses yet again and as she says it, I realize I'm tugging at a thread in the stitching of the exam table. “Sometimes the IUD drifts, and it gets embedded in the uterine wall.”

Another couple of minutes, “I'm going to use an ultrasound.” The transducer is chilly,

and I wriggle involuntarily. My mind drifts like a wandering IUD until gradually I become aware that the transducer is hovering over the left side of my groin.

“Um,” says Cho, “okay, something's come up on the scan.”

“A fibroid?” I say, but she doesn't reply. My voice gets louder, “Doctor Cho, is it a fibroid?”

She says something but there's blood pounding in my ears, and everything's muffled.

Doctor Cho has a suspicion, that's all. Every time is different, you don't want to jump to conclusions. On our seventh birthday I choked on a handful of grapes. You see this thing that looks a little like a spoke wheel? It was our first birthday after Mom died. Dad threw us an ice-skating party downtown at Daley Plaza and invited the whole class, but it was minus ten and only two other girls showed up. A solid and complex mass. Trudy skated with her friend Mandy while I sulked and scarfed down my snack; they held hands and did a sit spin until Trudy collided splat with a fat man coming the other way. Irregular walls, do you see this serration over here? I laughed, and a grape lodged in my windpipe. Mandy's dad grabbed me round the waist and yanked his arm up over my belly button, and it shot out like a champagne cork. A cyst would be clear, from the fluid, that's how you'd tell it from a tumor. Five minutes later everyone had forgotten about it but I was afraid to eat for a week. Every breath, my throat constricting, swelling shut. A hysterectomy can greatly reduce the risk. I'm made of glass and will shatter if I fall or turn my head too fast. Prevent the spread to secondary organs. A cloud in my chest, the sensation of drowning in air-

I struggle with my boots, blinking back hot little tears. Doctor Cho re-enters, I didn't see her go. Is she embarrassed to see me crying? She's hunting for something in the cupboard, and I blink faster but suddenly she's offering me a box.

“Take a handful,” she says. I look down and see it's a box of tissues, and erupt into boohooos, overcome by her small kindness. I wad up half the box and blow a really good solid honk; it's loud and sustained and musical, and I can't help but laugh, which sets Doctor Cho off. Too. She comes and puts her arm around me, and I'm crylaughing “hoo hoo hoo hooooo” like a deflating bagpipe.

“We'll run more tests,” she insists. I nod.

“It could be, there's a lot of things,” she insists. I nod.

“Don't even think about, you don't want to jump to conclusions. The biopsy takes a week, and we'll have a better idea, fingers crossed,” I nod and nod again.

Jacynth enters backwards, her clipboard horizontal like a tray on which sits a red velvet cupcake and a single unlit candle; this restarts the waterworks. “Oh, honey,” says Jacynth then she's lunging towards me for some reason, and my legs feel weird, and next thing I know Jacynth and Doctor Cho are struggling either side to prop me up, Happy and Doc buttressing a pie-eyed Snow White strung out on one too many poisoned appletinis. Then I'm in a chair, and Doctor Cho is pressing a cup of water into my shaking hand but when I gulp it down it has an unbearably sickly taste, and I realize it's OJ and spill it all down the front of my blouse.

Doctor Cho pats me down with a wet-wipe. Jacynth finds my scarf. “I like your earrings,” she says.

“I need to wash my hands,” I say, “they're sticky.”

Finally make it to the restroom and turns out I don't need to pee after all. OK, body, enough mixed messages out of you. The quavering trill of warm water is deliciously hot on my cold-freckled hands. I stare for a moment at my face in the mirror, crisscrossed with laugh lines, then I lather up, rub my hands together gently in the stream and rinse away all the spit-up stains

and dirty diapers, the croup and cloth wipes, whooping coughs and umbrella strollers, night terrors and teething rings and very hungry caterpillars, failure to latch, failure to thrive, failure to launch; they spiral the pop-up sink stopper and vanish from sight. Happy birthday me.

“Surprise!” I say, and stick out my tongue. I crack myself up.

I take a minute and return to the waiting room. Katie's there, saying bye to a tall woman. She looks at me, and I blush and wipe my eyes. She stares for a moment with an odd, shrewd expression on her face, and then heads to the bathroom. Someone's toddler is laying out a string of red and yellow Connect Four tiles in a line across the floor. She takes one tile at a time, carries it to the end of the line, places it very purposefully, and then goes back for the next one.

“Judy?”

“Trudy!?” It's my sister Trudy! I forgot we made plans to meet here. And she's wearing the koala earrings I bought her as a birthday present. “Ha!” I point. She giggles.

“We could be twins!” says Trudy, and we laugh.

“Did you try the gingerbread?” says Trudy. “Lucille makes it. They say it helps with morning sickness.”

I look around. “Where's your kids?”

“Ella's got Brownies till six, and Emma's got Suzuki violin. Oh, hello. Okay, bring it in.”

I hug her tight as I can and bury my face in her fuzzy sweater.

“Love you, babe,” says Trudy.

“I love you, too,” I say, a mouth full of mohair. It should be enough. It's not enough. I hug even tighter, curled into a fist of grief.

Trudy ruffles my hair. The mohair tickles.

“Sorry to sneeze on you,” I say.

“This sweater's seen worse than that.”

I dig my face in. “You've got cheerios under your collar.”

The combination of Trudy's grace and mohair eventually brings me round, and we come unclasped. Trudy looks for a moment into my eyes, and I remember my own reflection in the bathroom mirror, and suddenly I recognize the odd look Katie gave me.

Doctor Cho enters. “Miss Bell?” she says, looking up at Trudy through her thick glasses. She takes Trudy aside and begins to explain something in a low voice so I get down on my hands and knees and help extend the line of Connect Four tiles until we run out.

“Good game kid,” I say, “don't ever let the box tell you how to play.” She nods in that serious, deliberate way toddlers do. “High five!”

“Ready to go?” asks Trudy.

At the rear of the clinic racoons have overturned a trashcan into the snow of the parking lot. “Ugh, don't look,” says Trudy, and I don't, but skip lightly over the scattered waste, softlanding in a tiny hillock of fresh fallen snow.

“Think fast,” says Katie, and as I turn a snowball hits me square in the face.

We stare at each other for a second and then burst out laughing.

Music Man
- Peter Spence



You Smell Better Than You Think - David Raney

You smell better than your dog. Not a high bar, perhaps, if your dog like mine considers rolling on dead birds the pinnacle of existence. But on the other side of the sniff, your nose – despite the bloodhound’s well-deserved reputation for olfactory legerdemain – might be equally talented.

Consider an experiment I wish I’d thought of. Berkeley researchers dipped twine in chocolate and laid it in patterns across a grassy field, then asked student volunteers to follow the trail on all fours, using only their noses. They wore blindfolds, earmuffs, knee pads and thick gloves to make sure no other senses could chime in.

Sniffing like bloodhounds, two-thirds of thirty-two subjects were able to follow the chocolate scent to the end of the trail within three attempts. All volunteers zigzagged along the trail in the same way that tracking dogs follow a scent.

The researchers then trained four of these volunteers to see if they could improve. All were able to double their speed along the track within just a few days and deviated much less from the scent trail than on their first attempts.

“Our sense of smell is less keen partly because we put less demand on it,” said Jess Porter, lead author of the study. “But if people practice sniffing smells, they can get really good at it.”

In fact, we’re already really good at it – we just think we’re not. We all pay attention to our senses, of course. We admire a musician’s trained ear, or a birder’s, and envy friends with eagle eyes who see things as clearly at twenty feet as we do at ten. (For actual eagles, that would be twenty and four.) We marvel at the blind learning Braille, their fingertips telling them things ours don’t, or gourmards distinguishing subtleties in food and drink that escape the rest of us.

But smell gets no respect. Think about it: you have the innate ability to detect someone barbecuing half a mile away, a tiny gas leak, an approaching storm. And smelling those things – food, danger, weather – has been important to us for a long time, so it makes sense we’d be experts. We’ve been smelling the world since well before we had words to describe its pleasures and perils.

This includes the ultimate danger. Years ago, a woman killed herself in a parking lot near my home. I’d seen the car Tuesday in a far corner of the lot and assumed it was abandoned. My golden retriever showed some interest, tiptoeing around, but he picked up his tennis ball when I called and galloped back for another throw. Friday after dinner I walked out again, dog spinning and barking, and threw a ball as far as I could into the twilight. He streaked after it, and my eyes, following, focused on the car. There were three people standing around it, arms folded as if the evening had turned cold. They were facing different directions, and they looked lost. Walking closer, I noticed flies bumping the car windows and an unmistakable smell, one that farmers know but not most suburbanites. Gas companies add this odor to warn of leaks, knowing it touches our oldest selves and we’ll rise from our beds without knowing why, bodies for once speaking directly to the world.

At the other end of existence, smell is the only fully developed sense we have in the womb, and it remains primary until around age ten, bypassing the filters and waystations our brain uses to let our other senses make sense. “One of the things that makes smell distinctive,” explains one researcher, “is that olfactory information is not rooted through this ‘switchboard’ structure called the thalamus on the way to other ‘thinking’ brain regions.” Instead, it goes

straight from the olfactory bulb to our limbic system, which includes regions tied to emotion and memory. A current theory proposes that odors stimulate the brain to make new neurons in those areas, so it isn't surprising that a diminished sense of smell has been linked to schizophrenia, depression, and Alzheimer's.

That express lane to you-beneath explains why memories so often seem to come from nowhere. A whiff of a former flame's perfume, your grandfather's tobacco or that mimeograph from middle school can transport you instantly, like Proust's madeleine, across all the miles and years.

We all have those moments. I stepped out one morning in eastern Virginia, bright and dry, fifty heading for seventy, and got a lungful of Scotland. It was unsummoned, probably some plant blooming nearby, and instead of standing with my keys in the carport, I was on a street in Edinburgh ten years earlier, cold stones and water nearby. It lasted just a few seconds but was more real than whatever I was thinking about a minute earlier, or anything I did the rest of the day.

Why then is smell the poor cousin of the senses? Half of all people aged sixteen to thirty say they'd give up their ability to smell before their phone or laptop. But we can do some amazing things with those noses. You know your friends and relatives by smell, embodied (literally) in sweat. Married couples can pick out each other's scents blindfolded, and even if you've been apart more than two years, you can still recognize your brother's or sister's unique odor print, the signature mixture of chemicals floating off their bodies. And your body, too: Adults in a 1989 study were able to identify their own t-shirts out of 100 identical shirts worn by others.

It even works with strangers. One study found that people with similar body odors are more likely to hit it off, and in a blind test even a third stranger could identify which two scents were "click friends," clicking on first sight.

But *how* do we smell them? Not your sister, father, or lover, not your baby's fragrant head, but complete strangers? We can smell someone's cologne in the elevator, or that body spray that clears out the subway car, but body scents are subtler and most of us don't hug strangers, for perfectly good reasons, much less plunge our faces into random armpits. We do touch strangers, though, or get close enough to smell them, whether we realize it or not. Even in so-called low-touch cultures such as Japan and Korea, for instance, deep bows and cheek kisses bring faces inches apart. And when you shake a stranger's hand – a new team member at work, say – it's likely that soon afterward you'll sniff your fingers.

No way, you might say. That's nuts. And you would share that certainty with the subjects of an experiment conducted by Idan Frumin, whose team secretly videotaped people after a handshake with someone they'd just met. A few seconds later,

the subjects would inevitably sniff their own hands to gain some odorous information about the new person. "When we showed them the videos," Frumin says, "many of the subjects were completely shocked and disbelieving. Some thought we had doctored the videos."

That we think we have only minimal ability or need to smell owes quite a lot to one man: Paul Broca, a 19th century French physician and anatomist whose name you might know from Carl Sagan's 1979 book *Broca's Brain*. Broca made some seminal contributions to brain science, but he whiffed on smell. His main mistake was assuming that in the brain game, size matters.

Broca noticed that our olfactory bulbs are relatively smaller than those of some “lower” animals and that our frontal lobes (specializing in speech, cognition, and free will) are relatively larger, and decided these facts must be linked. Rising from the beasts meant putting aside smell and the baser behaviors it caters to.

There was a Freudian aspect to this since those primitive instincts were all about food and (what else) sex. As neurobiologist John McGann notes,

Broca thought of smell as this almost dirty, animalistic thing that compelled animals to have sex with each other and things like that. The idea got picked up by Sigmund Freud, who then thought of smell as an animalistic thing that had to be left behind as a person grew into a rational adult. So, you had in psychology, philosophy, and anthropology all these different pathways to the presumption that humans didn’t have a good sense of smell.

Broca’s conclusions stank partly because it isn’t the size of the bulb, it’s the brain processing it. “A bigger animal isn’t smelling a smellier world,” says McGann, and ours is a “much more complicated and powerful brain” than that of a rat or a shark. “Astonishingly,” he adds, “Broca never actually measured the sensory *abilities* of the creatures he discussed,” humans included. “It’s strange because... he could smell, right?”

He could, and we can, and much better than we know. Our eyes can distinguish several million colors, our ears perhaps half a million tones, but science used to think our odor list was capped at around ten thousand. It turns out this number was just a guess by two chemical engineers in 1927. Estimates now go as high as a trillion. At any rate the things we can smell, as Harold McGee writes in *Nose Dive*, are “apparently endless, or at least more than we can count.”

“I’m not crazy,” McGann says in an *Atlantic* article by the improbably named Amanda Onion. “There are things that dogs can do that humans can’t. But it’s also hard to generalize because we rarely test ourselves.” Alexandra Horowitz in *Inside a Dog* puts it this way: “Dogs bother to sniff at all. They put their noses to things. Look what we do with smell: find the Cinnabon store at the airport.” But when we do put ourselves to the test, it can be eye-opening.

McGann studied smell in rats and mice before turning to humans, and he was unprepared for how good we were.

We started with an experiment that required two odors that humans can’t tell apart – but we couldn’t find any. So, we tried odors that *mice* can’t tell apart, and humans were like “No, we’ve got this.” We can detect and discriminate an extraordinary range of odors.

Return for a moment to those volunteers crawling around in the grass. The authors tested fifteen substances that day, and on five of them people outperformed dogs. This doesn’t make us world champions, it simply reflects the fact that, in the words of biologist Matthias Laska, “Odors that are not relevant for you, you are usually not good at.” The scents we beat the pooches at had fruit or flower components (we’re particularly good at bananas), which are not nearly as important to a carnivore as the carbolic acids wafting from walking meat – those featured in nine of the other ten trials.

“Species specialize in different scents that are important to their lifestyles or ecological niches,” says Laska, and this goes beyond you and Rover. Pigs can’t be beat at hunting truffles, honeybees have special sugar antennae, and sharks can smell a drop of blood in ten billion drops

of water. The nostrils at the end of an African elephant's trunk can locate a water source twelve miles away. But they'd all be terrible at detecting each other's central scents, their mates, prey, food, and friends.

"What's important, I think, is that nothing needs to sense everything," says Ed Yong, author of *An Immense World*. "Our senses have evolved to give us exactly the kinds of information we need." This perceptual bubble, the "thin sliver of reality we have access to," was given the name *umwelt* by a German biologist in 1909. It applies to all the beings we share the planet with: blind bats following air compression waves, ticks both blind and deaf but supremely sensitive to temperature, fish guided by electrical fields, rattlesnakes by infrared. Even we humans don't all sense the same. Androstenone, for instance, the first mammalian pheromone ever identified, smells, depending on who's sniffing it, like sweat, urine, sandalwood, vanilla, or nothing at all.

"If you have three people who can't even agree on whether something is pleasant, revolting, or simply odorless," says Gary Beauchamp of the Monell Chemical Senses Center, "you begin to see how complicated the science of smell is."

Umwelt might strike you as limiting or even depressing, especially when translated as "self-centered world." One neuroscientist describes it as "unobtainable information and unimagined possibilities." But I look at it differently. Those big brains of ours can not only sense what's there (or some fraction of it), they can also envision what isn't. Unimagined possibilities, in other words, don't have to stay that way. Ed Harris, playing the producer in *The Truman Show*, is asked why Jim Carrey never questions his life, which everyone else in the film views as constricted and contrived. Harris shrugs: "We accept the reality of the world with which we're presented."

Like Carrey's character, though, we don't have to. Studying other animals' interfaces with the world, and our own, can only engender wonder at the almost infinite variety of life and our ingenious responses to it. "It's a wonderful way to remind ourselves," says neuroscientist Johan Lundstrom, "that there's so much going on all the time around us that we're mostly not aware of. We'd be driven crazy to pay attention to all of it all the time, but it's wonderful to be nudged out of our complacency and realize that there is something amazing going on."

The next time life contracts, gets too fast or narrow, and you feel drab and ungifted, try petting your dog. Hug a friend. Stop and smell the chocolate.

Guidelines

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