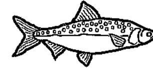


Weeds

I perched on the exam-room chair, in the open-in-the-front gown, exposed and vulnerable.

Lisa K. Harris

Essay

With hula hoe and spade, I slice taproots and upend rhizomes. A pile grows: leaves, blossoms, tubers. On hands and knees, I grub. Thrust the hand spade deep. Push handle's butt-end with my palm, at the auspicious intersection of life, health, and fate lines.

Weeds poke among fledgling peony, dogwood, salvia, honey bush. With moderate temperatures, twenty-three inches of rain per annum, western-facing slope, and well-drained soil, the weeds have it good. After birds, deer, and wind carried their seeds to my Whidbey Island cottage, a two-hour drive north, including ferry, from Seattle, the infidels settle in. They ignore the jaw-dropping maritime view and threaten my crazy-quilt of fuchsia, lavender, vermillion, and alabaster blossom patches. Their spikes, rosettes, and thorns multiply in imported soil, forty tons trucked in at exorbitant cost. "You have no choice," the horticulturalist said when I balked, "babied nursery plants won't survive in native clay." The weeds wreak havoc, act like high school seniors on graduation night. Late June, with nearly sixteen hours of sunshine daily, they party loud and long, stick their middle finger in the air if restrained. On hands and knees, I am unsure what the intended baby plants look like, so censure only what appears out of place.

***

"What are you looking for?" I asked the radiological technician two months earlier. Lying in a darkened, frigid room in the Tucson, Arizona image center, with a thin cotton blanket draping my midsection, I stared at a monitor. She moved the plastic sonogram wand slathered with petroleum-based lubricant over my right breast.

Asking questions dissipated tension, gathered information, and retained control of my body. I expected, "The radiologist will tell you." The answer every time for the past twenty-five years, as my

breasts have been worked over by mammography, radiologic, and surgical technicians in a quest to find something that's not there.

"This, at eight o'clock." She pointed to the screen: black blob in a field of striated gray muscle. Moving the wand a smidge, the perfectly spherical orb disappeared, appeared.

"Six millimeters. As small as we can detect, given your tissue density. Probably a cyst."

An abundant amount of information, but I was her only patient this late April day according to the week's schedule written on the wall's whiteboard, with surnames, birthdates, gender, appointment times, HIPAA rules be damned.

The technician was bored, eager to interact, like the two mammography technicians I saw beforehand. They, too, uncharacteristically pointed to screens, to what triggered a radiologist to request additional images of the left, the breast tracked for over a decade, then the right. My scheduled forty-minute appointment now ran past two hours.

The room brightened as the door opened. The radiologist entered, young with a ponytail.

"What a cute mask," she said. "I've never seen one with fruit on it." She glanced at the tech. "Ours are boring." Throw-away paper, medical-grade.

"Etsy," I said. "Can't be choosey, most fabrics are sold out."

The tech nodded, made note, I imagined, to surf the crafty website later. She handed the wand to the doctor.

The radiologist duplicated the exam then floated the wand under my arm, glided over lymph nodes. No one had surfed my lymph nodes before.

She exhaled when the screen revealed nothing, returned the wand to my breast. She pointed to the screen's transient balloon. Explained tissue physiology, her upcoming move to Flagstaff before summer's heat, how she'd miss her work buddies. A nod to the technician. I asked how long she'd been in Tucson: medical school, residency, three kids (all girls, cute-as-buttons, added the tech). The radiologist, too, lacked for company.

"What do you think it is?" I asked.

"Cyst or ductal carcinoma. Leaning toward a cyst. Let's schedule a biopsy."

***

Of all weeds, field or common horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*)

is the gardener's bane. Nearly all stem—hollow and jointed, with a rough glassy exterior coated with silica—they range in height between six and eighteen inches. Common horsetail grows in a variety of conditions: fields and woodlands; beside roads, train tracks, and streams; with a preference for damp, shaded soil. Horsetails produce spindly rhizomes, which spread profusely in thick networks and can grow as deep as six feet. Roots produce numerous stems, which, if given the right conditions, grow dense as grass. They are a pioneer species. After a flood, avalanche, plow, or upended dump truck of fresh soil, horsetail is one of the first species to colonize. They germinate from spores that appear to jump into the wind, thus creating vast immigration opportunities.

In my imported dirt, horsetails establish quicker, an evolutionary honed skill, than the cultivars my horticulturalist chose. While her plants quivered in transplant shock, horsetails spread.

***

When medical files were hard copies, I could point to mine from behind the reception desk. It was the thickest. Now my electronic file must be gigabytes: over two decades of patient contact information, scans, reports, insurance forms, primary care referrals.

The folder was created after I felt a lump behind my right nipple.

I was thirty-five.

I panicked. Imagined whatever it was had spread, that I felt a BB-sized metastasis, similar to what my husband Peter felt on his clavicle two years prior. Like Peter, I surely would die within six weeks, the time from his adenocarcinoma diagnosis to death. Who would take care of our toddler, Lyda, soon to be orphaned?

My BB turned out to be a harmless cyst.

On subsequent screenings, doctors unearthed bumps, star-like milk ducts, dark blobs. They recommended follow-up scans, sonograms, biopsies. Found cysts and "let's-keep-an-eye-on" weirdly behaving milk ducts. Some years I thought doctors scammed me for insurance money. Some years I wasn't up to their avarice and failed to schedule a screening.

At age forty-four, one of the bright lights on the mammogram, a "lets-keep-an-eye-on" kooky milk duct, led to a sonogram then a biopsy. The pathology report read ductal carcinoma in situ or DCIS. At The University of Arizona's teaching hospital, within walking distance from my home, a surgeon performed a lumpectomy after I nixed a "just-to-be-sure" mastectomy. "Your prior uneven breasts

are even now," he said post-surgery, "So you can wear striped shirts without looking lopsided." I had tossed my last striped shirt in high school after a girl in the "in" clique said, "Wow, size B and C freak show."

While I waited for the pathology report on tissue margins, I binged on T-shirts, started to dress like teenage Lyda. But three months was a long time to wait, and any glee garnered by admiring my figure in shopping mall mirrors was overshadowed by visions of the DCIS casting tendrils and invading every organ.

Surely my boob contained a ticking bomb. My unease amplified after my second husband failed to keep my condition quiet until I knew more. "Tick-Tock" read the Hallmark cards from my adult stepchildren instead of the printed sympathetic clichés.

"Nothing there," the surgeon said after Harvard University's hospital reviewed my case. "The biopsy either removed all cancer cells, or you were misdiagnosed."

A misdiagnosis.

At annual mammograms, I corrected technicians when they congratulated me on being a cancer survivor. "I've never had cancer," I said, and checked the Yes/No History of Cancer box "No." When the radiologist in a paper mask with a ponytail and three blonde cute-as-buttons girls said, "We don't have to track your left breast anymore, fifteen years of follow-ups are enough," I had to think about what she meant.

***

In my mid-fifties after thirty years in the desert, I sought a place near water for future retirement. A Whidbey Island home would be close to Lyda, who now lived in Seattle, and on familiar ground, an island where my parents once lived and where Peter and I hiked and fished. While my youngest, teenage Ava, tethered me to Tucson, once she left for college I would winter at my desert home, summer on the island, spring and fall in between. Buy a van, shuttle to and fro, work remotely. Invite friends. Best friend Jane would park in the spare bedroom. I found a cottage and renovated, yanked out phone and cable lines, created a retreat from the hubbub. The prior fall, what passed for a lawn was rototilled and buried beneath trucked-in dirt.

***

"Any word?" Jane asked.

Saturday morning, first week of May, we hiked Tucson Mountain Park. "The rad doctor called, said they sent the biopsy to another lab."

The trail twined through a clump of saguaro cacti, the top of each column ringed with white, trumpet-shaped blossoms.

"I haven't heard that the path lab cut back on staff." Jane, a neurologist, was all-knowing on hospital medicine, as well as a breast cancer survivor.

"Maybe they're busy with other tests."

Jane and I spent Saturdays discussing politics, ex-husbands, alumni events, retirement schemes while hiking or cycling. Of late, we deep-dived into medical issues. COVID-19. Jane's melanoma. Affordable healthcare. Mostly Jane's melanoma. I listened. Sometimes I sussed a path forward. Rarely was I emotional, having learned from Peter that expressing "Oh my God!" or "You got this!" eviscerated conversations. I approached Jane's situation with my academic toolbox: critique studies, question sources, analyze results. So talking about me was a change. Surprisingly welcome, as there were just so many Saturdays I could process Jane's lower-than-desired liver enzyme counts, inconsistent scans, misinformed doctors, swelling in odd places, experimental treatments. But then I'd feel bad we spent time on me. Jane needed our Saturdays to vent, as she had confided to only one other.

Jane said, "Probably benign and they want confirmation."

Twice seemed unlikely. I pointed uphill. "Look at those ironwoods, such an abundant spring show."

"What? Oh, those. I hadn't noticed them before."

The scrubby trees were dusted with tiny lavender flowers, like cotton candy.

My gut screamed malignancy: there had been too much rigmarole making the appointment. Fate or miscommunication between my primary and the image center had pushed the analysis nearly five months, time to find something that might not have been visible when I received a December reminder letter.

"Ava suggests I stop copying you."

Jane laughed. "Who says who's copying who? You maybe had breast cancer first." She pulled up her bandana, stepped from the trail. Mountain bikers hurtled toward us. I yanked on my mask, sidestepped a barrel cactus, its crown crammed with bodacious fuchsia blossoms, and stood beside her.

We graduated from the University of Chicago together. Our oldest daughters and now our youngest children attended the same Tucson high school. We journeyed to the same countries, rode

matching white Trek bikes. Twinsies Ava called us.

After the cyclists chugged past, the riders huffing, Jane pulled from her water bottle. "It's hot. Still planning on going to Whidbey?"

"Memorial Day weekend, right after school ends."

"Ask the radiologist for a UW doc referral." She turned to hike the hill. "In case it's something."

"Whatever it is, they'll cut it out, and I'll be done with it." Like last time.

***

I eyed the plumbago shrubs ringing my Tucson kitchen window. They'd grown in since I'd whacked them to the ground during spring's stay-at-home orders. Now thigh-high, their stem tips were thick with periwinkle blue blossoms. Doctors only call Fridays after dinner with bad news. The tallest sprays reached the windowsill and the plants' bases met the walkway, all in symmetry.

"I'm sorry it's taken this long," the ponytailed radiologist said on the phone.

One spray poked beyond the sill. I tapped the speaker button, laid the phone on the patio. With a hand clipper, I truncated the gangly taper.

"Three weeks is a long time to wait," she said.

A bud spray grew two inches past the imaginary vertical line separating walkway and planter bed. Prior Mays, I edited foliage, left buds and blossoms. Prior years, the plants grew unruly.

"Sorry about the results, too. I was so sure it was benign."

I reached inside the shrub. Snipped. A five-inch-long bit, bud and all, fluttered earthward.

"Stage 2 Invasive Ductal Carcinoma, estrogen receptive."

She had said this before, hadn't she? Another spray grew further over the walkway. I must have missed it. Whack.

"Hello? Hello?"

I turned from the plumbago. "Yes."

"I thought my cell lost you. Are you okay?"

Another stem reached beyond the sill a tad. A third. And a fourth. They would spread upward and from inside the kitchen, the chaos would bother me. "I'm fine." Snip. Snip. Snip.

I sensed the radiologist's confusion. She probably thought, *Does this woman understand?*

"Well, I'm not fine, as you know," I said. "What's next?" Said to ease her uncomfortableness, reestablish the I-know-more-than-you

relationship. Although I knew what came next. From Peter. From Jane. From fifteen years ago.

I would be in great hands, she said, the university teaching hospital one of the finest. A breast cancer specialized team would take over: surgeon, radiologist, oncologist. "If I was in your situation, I'd want this team."

'Your situation.' I sheared off another wayward plume.

"The surgeon's office will call Monday. Get you in ASAP. You're lucky she's assigned to you."

I placed the shears on the patio table before I decimated the bush. Lucky. Indeed, both the plumbago and I. If I had had the scan in December, the then-minuscule tumor would have flown under high-powered lenses. The radiologist would have given me a pass, and I would have waited a year for my next appointment, maybe skipped it, even two, depending on how I felt about having my breasts flattened between glass plates. It would have been bigger then, gangly with more tendrils. Gnarly to edit.

***

The *Equistetum* genus, to which seventeen living horsetail species belong, is ancient. They were antiquarian when dinosaurs roamed, old when angiosperms, today's dominant plant group, originated. Millions of years ago, now-extinct species grew tall, created *Equistetum* forests. The earth was so boggy that when individuals died, they neither burned nor rotted but sunk into muck. Piled on one another, crushing those below, over time, the weight of so many dead *Equistetum* produced coal.

***

"I don't understand how this happened." I perched on the exam room chair, in the open-in-the-front gown, exposed and vulnerable.

The surgical oncologist turned from the computer screen and pushed her bifocals into her hair, as a headband. She had more gray hair than I, a lot more, and while I plucked offenders because they made me look aged, on her they instilled authority and trust. "It is rare, although not unheard of, to have cancer in both breasts at different times." She talked in a reassuring tone, as if it was no big deal.

"I didn't have cancer in my other breast. I was misdiagnosed."

She turned to the screen, lowered her glasses. "That *is* what your chart says may have happened." She snapped to face me, set her glasses back into her bob. "But I'm assuming you had cancer before."

Her tone serious. "And this is your second occurrence."

A rewriting of history.

But I wasn't ready to go there. "I was asking why I developed cancer in the first place. I eat organic foods. Don't smoke. Don't drink. Nursed both my daughters for ages. Eat raw kale. Stay clear of additives, red food dyes. Exercise. Do yoga. No family history of cancer. Well, one great-great-uncle with bowel cancer and a great-aunt with stomach cancer. But she *was* 97." I should not have cancer, not once, definitely not twice. "My mother bought organic. I was the only girl in elementary school whose sandwich was on brown bread. She packed green peppers in my lunch. This was Nashville in the late '60s."

"Where everyone ate Wonder Bread and bologna?" She smiled.

I liked her, liked her a lot. "Exactly. So why do I have cancer? I could have been smoking and drinking. Eating junk with red dye number forty." I'd been gypped. Held up my side of the contract, why hadn't my immune system held up its?

"It could be worse."

Like Peter. Like Jane.

On Saturday's hike, I said. "It's weird we all have cancer. Do you think it's from Kent? Peter took chemistry there. You, too. I took econ and math." University of Chicago's Kent Chemical Laboratory building, built in the late 1890s, was a favorite for lectures. Its cavernous semicircular hall with floor-to-domed-ceiling windows was to the right of a massive oak stairway that led upstairs to professors' offices and downstairs to a graduate student warren. A friend's father worked on the Manhattan Project there, chased uranium down Kent's stairs with a Geiger counter. In the mid-1980s, after Peter, Jane, and I graduated, Kent's ivied limestone facade was ringed with orange fencing. Men in white hazmat suits removed its innards. I was in grad school across the quadrangle and wondered if I had been contaminated in Kent's lecture hall with more than the Chicago School of Economics philosophy.

Jane paused, screwed up her mouth's corners, like when she pondered far-fetched yet strangely plausible ideas. "Three's too small of a sample. We have too many variables in our lives to control for. Not sure we can blame Kent. It *was* a lovely building."

"I could have been eating inappropriate food all this time. Swigging back a six-pack a day. Smoking Camels."

"Gross."

"This time around I'm going to have radiation. She's not cutting it out and saying I'm done. Plus a daily estrogen inhibitor. I don't take medication. The nurse asked me three times what I took since I left that answer blank on my intake questionnaire, as if I lied. 'You don't take *anything*?' she kept repeating."

"Well, now you will." Jane's bathroom cabinet burst with little plastic bottles.

"But I don't want to."

"It's one pill."

"That causes night sweats. Hair loss. Weight gain. I'll age. I'll *look* my age. I'll be fat."

"You'll be alive."

***

"Can I keep it? Can I? Can I?" A black head with white nose poked from Ava's shirt pocket. Dusk, we walked the terrier in a loop around our neighborhood, the same route at the same time, every evening.

"No."

"It found us, Mom! It's meant to be." Seventeen-year-old-turned-five Ava held a kitten midair. "Isn't it cute?'

Whiskers and legs splayed, it mewed.

Cried pathetically, like the three-week-old kitten it was. But that morning it had bellowed from the alley like a lost calf, hollered as if its life depended on me hearing it from inside the house.

"Come on! We've kept all the others."

Four cats and two dogs, one blind and deaf from birth; proceeded by twelve others. The cat silhouette weathervane on the roof was a beacon for strays. "No. I've got too much going on." Tuesday, SAVI locator inserted at eight o'clock position. Tuesday, COVID-19 test. Wednesday, genetic counseling. Wednesday, radiation consultation. Friday, lumpectomy. Monday, Wednesday, Saturday, buy kitten milk replacer. Every four hours feed with eye-dropper. Every feeding, stimulate to urinate and defecate.

A neighbor waved from her front porch. "I thought you'd left already." She watered potted cacti and agaves with a hose.

We stopped on the sidewalk. "Delayed. But soon." After surgery. After radiation. I'd only told Jane, my daughters, and friend Sarah of my cancer. I stopped sharing after Sarah halted during a walk, doubled over, clutched her stomach, offered to buy groceries. Her reaction made me feel incapable. Terminal.

Ava produced the kitten, held it like a trophy. "Look what we found this morning."

"Know anyone missing a kitten," I asked. "Know anyone who needs a kitty?"

The neighbor shook her head. "I'd take it but I have two. Three would be a handful."

I glared at Ava, in a "told you so" way.

"Bet you can't wait to get out of this heat," the neighbor said. "Your island garden must be lush."

So the pictures Lyda texted showed. I hadn't seen the garden since November when the plants were specks of green amidst the dirt. In recent photos, green pinpoints had grown quarter-sized. The vegetable patch was emerald, solid horsetail.

***

"That's unfortunate," a master gardener friend said. "They're impossible to eliminate."

"Cut them at the base," the horticulturist said. "Use scissors."

"Have to take them to the dump and pay. Dirt and mulch place doesn't accept them."

"Don't yank their roots. Pulling stimulates stem production."

"Came from the neighbor. She's let her yard go."

"After removal, add a thick layer of manure. Lowers the soil's pH. Real manure from the dirt and mulch place. They have a deal with a dairy farmer in Cashmere. But last time I checked, cow shit is backordered."

"Fertilize."

"Add lime."

"Keep cutting. Every day. Suffocates the rhizomes."

"May take up to five years to be rid of them."

***

"The surgery will take three hours," the surgical oncologist said. "I'll remove the tumor and several underarm lymph nodes. There's a two-week recovery period. Does general anesthesia bother you?"

"Radiation depends on the pathology," the radiologist said. "Every day for ten days if no lymph node involvement. Every day for five weeks if there is."

"One a day for five years," the oncologist said. "Side effects include thinning hair, weight gain, dry skin. Some women don't notice any changes from an estrogen inhibitor."

"I'll send you home with painkillers. The breast heals easily. The

discomfort comes from the underarm."

"Radiation may cause burning. Redness. Lymphedema. Puffiness, lack of fluid drain."

"If side effects are bothersome, I'll change the medication."

"Ninety-five percent chance of non-recurrence."

"Five percent chance of recurrence."

"A good outcome."

***

"Rough week?" Jane asked on the phone Saturday. We walked our respective neighborhoods, Jane quarantining after her son attended a Memorial weekend campout with friends.

"Yesterday was the first time I ate a meal, and it's been a week since the operation."

"Any swelling?"

"No. They sent me home in a surgical bra, a cross between a corset and a two-sizes-too-small sports bra. I'm supposed to wear it 24/7 for two weeks."

"Sounds hideous."

"It's great. I stand straighter. My back doesn't hurt."

"I wish I had an entire body bra. Would help with my edema. I'm not sure if it's the new chemo regimen or disease progression."

"What's your oncologist think?"

Jane snorted. "I'm going with side effects because the other route will keep me up at night. At this point, I know more than he does."

I told of my pre-op meeting, of the resident's review before my procedure. "Left breast," he said. "Right," I countered. He retreated to the nurses' station to confirm which to deform. "Right," he said upon return. "We're removing two tumors, at two and three o'clock. "Wrong," I said. "One at eight o'clock." He flipped through his notes, realized the two-tumored patient was the one after me.

"I was hesitant about signing consent forms," I told Jane. "But I was naked. It *was* 5:30 a.m., and Ava had left, since all she could do was drop me off. So I signed, hoped I caught all the fires before they put me under."

"Amazing you have both boobs."

I stopped walking. "Do you see smoke from the Catalinas? Flames just jumped the ridge!" The Santa Catalina's marked Tucson's northern edge, craggy granite mountains that rose to over nine thousand feet, brimming with ponderosa pine, yellow columbine, scrub oak, a mountain we played in.

"Lightning, wasn't it? Not even the season for it either. Crazy. So unexpected. Looks like the entire front range is out of control."

Looked like my life felt.

At night the mountain glowed. Hot spots sprouted, orange waves raced down canyons, galloped across ridges. Pines exploded. Neighbors clustered at street corners. Some stood on retaining walls. Gaped. We held our breaths, shook our heads.

"Awful," my neighbor said. "Those poor people with cabins. Not to mention all those folks with homes at the base."

Sarah had spent the day emptying her cabin in the pines. Ava's dad had evacuated from his foothills home.

"You find a home for the kitty?" the neighbor asked.

Ava flashed her phone's light on the sidewalk. The kitten, swimming in an extra-extra-small blue polka-dotted harness, tracked a bug. "I'm teaching it to go on walks." Ava jerked the lead, and the kitten's white-socked paws left the ground.

"If you know of anyone who needs a kitten, send them our way," I said.

"Is it a male?" the neighbor asked.

"Don't know," Ava said. "I've studied a gazillion YouTube videos of cat genitals and still can't tell."

The neighbor pointed north. "Oh my! The fire's spread so. The Catalinas' far side is burning now. The world's going to hell in a handbasket. I'd get out of here if I could."

Ava said, "We're shooting to leave around the end of the month."

After radiation.

***

Two weeks later, I parked my truck at the cancer center, the hospital where Peter was treated, where Jane was now treated, where I was treated fifteen years ago, and inhaled dried pine and fir. Thousands of acres of forest had burned, continued to burn. Smoke billowed, turned blue sky grey-red. Planes dropped fire retardant and red dust lines streaked the mountain like stretch marks. Every day another foothills' neighborhood packed their bags, advanced in Ready, Set, Go evacuation stages.

Past the cancer center gatekeepers, nurses with thermometers and questions, I slowed my pace to others, slogged through mud. No one spoke. No one laughed. No one wanted to be there. Everyone looked sickly. They had cancer. I *had* cancer.

Inside the radiology clinic, I waved my card under a scanner and

sailed past double doors, down the hall, and into a cavernous room with a single bed in the middle. Mick Jagger belted *You Can't Always Get What You Want* from speakers.

No lymph node involvement, the pathology report read. Five treatments, the radiologist said. "Stronger doses than usual so you come fewer times, to lessen exposure to others. Five doses, one every other day."

This was my last.

The tech covered me with a heated blanket, adjusted the pillow underneath my shoulder. She positioned the bed, raised it a smidge, lowered it a fraction.

"Don't move," she said.

Overhead, on a massive monitor, a forest appeared. Rain dripped from leaves and water rushed along a stream. A cream-colored paddle obscured moss-coated bark as it passed over my chest, its tick tick tick sound obscured by babbling brook. Then, after the paddle went under the bed, a foggy beach appeared, the Golden Gate in the distance. The paddle passed across my chest again. Lapping waves transitioned to rustling leaves, an aspen grove, in full-on fall color.

I drifted into the forest.

"All done," the tech said. "We hope to never see you again."

***

The next day, Thursday, June 25, and two months after the rad tech's wand paused over a symmetrical orb, we were out the door at seven thirty a.m.. Ava and terrier in the truck's front, blind Australian Shepard on backseat floor, five cat carriers double-stacked and bungee-corded to the backseat. Cat food, litter, dog food, five-gallon water jug, cooler of food, luggage, and a chair from Ava's room filled the pickup's bed.

I'd never driven to the island before, never taken a pet.

The cats howled. Complained of tight quarters. Disrupted schedules. Harnessed, they howled at their loss of freedom. They howled as I gunned the motor north. Sixty-three thousand cases of COVID-19 in Arizona. Twenty days and counting of fire in the Santa Catalinas. Breast cancer. Twice.

Howled.

Until outside Flagstaff, four hours in, when Ava's feed played Johnny Cash's *I Walked the Line* and they shut-up. Maybe it was Cash's bass-baritone. Maybe cooler temperatures. Maybe they were tired of hearing themselves whine. Maybe they spotted my shoulders fall.

I-10, I-17, SR-89, I-70, I-15, I-84, I-82, I-90.

At pit stops, I placed the cute-as-a-button Bittie, the kitten, on the Ford's hood and snapped photos: along a gravel road with Utah's Paunsaugunt Plateau's red ridge as backdrop; at the Great Salt Lake north of Logan; on the lawn of Hilgard Junction State Park, Oregon, Bittie cross-eyed as she explored turf grass for the first time. "Oh my God, Ava," I said after each. "Isn't she adorable?"

Saturday, we skirted Seattle on the 405, exited to SR-52. We sailed down the hill, spotted the white and red postcard-perfect lighthouse and an approaching ferry. In the vehicle holding area, I turned the engine off. I'd reached the finish line! Drove sixteen hundred miles. Three days. One teenager, two dogs, five cats.

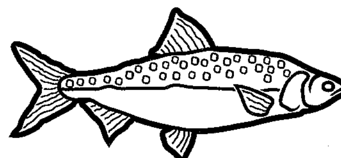
Ava bolted to the ice cream stand: soft swirl, a ferry-to-the-island ritual. I scrolled through my phone, listened to voice mail.

"Jane died," a friend said, the other person Jane had confided in, a doctor. "Thursday. Returned home after a late afternoon appointment. Five-ish. Lay on the couch to rest. Her kids found her. An aneurysm, I guess."

Thursday, five-ish. While I snapped cute-as-a-button Bittie on the hood, against the red rocks of Utah's Paunsaugunt Plateau. A clot from her swollen legs.

***

I need to talk to someone. Hug someone. But it's Jane's words and hug I need. So I dig. Jam spade against hand's heel. Upend roots. Cast away leaves and stems. On hands and knees I clear the vegetable patch of horsetail. Fertilize. Spread three yards of manure, real manure from Cashmere. Each morning I swallow 1 mg Anastrozole tablet. A pill a tad larger than the green pepper seed I found in my school lunch bag. Cancer. Twice. Check the box "Yes." Nod after technicians congratulate me on survivorship. Each morning I upend horsetail emergents. I pull hair from my brush. There is hair on the bathroom floor, kitchen counter, yoga mat. A trail between house and garden. Every day. I press the spade against hand's palm. A circular wound grows, the size of the spade's handle, the size of the tumor on the sonogram screen, a wound at the junction of life, health, and fate lines.



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This issue is dedicated to Dr. John Thomas Schott, 1944-2020

whitefish review

Illumination from Montana

Taking Flight

Featuring Montana Co-Poets Laureate:
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Montana Prize for Fiction
Plus: Jimmy Kimmel & Huey Lewis
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Summer/Fall 2021