

BREATH

SPRING: A GENERALIST
STUMBLES INTO THE SEASON

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Spring in western Pennsylvania—with its tentative foliage and water trickling down hillsides, just as Frank Lloyd Wright intended—is supposed to answer the call of a capricious marmot named Phil, whom you may recognize from the movies or from your vegetable garden if you’ve ever had trouble cultivating lettuce. Groundhog Day 2018 arrived with clear, blustery skies and enough sunlight to scare our hero back into hiding. The goddess stood silently for a moment surveying the scene at Gobbler’s Nob, gave a nod in Phil’s direction, and decided to start early.

According to E.E. Cummings, “the world is puddle-wonderful” in spring. In Pittsburgh—where the collective mood is rapidly cycling between thaw and freeze, thaw and freeze—the puddles can’t be trusted. Their mirrored faces belie calamities: potholes large enough to swallow my Hyundai.

On the wards, little *Ixodes scapularis*—purveyor of artisanal spirochetes—is already sending us cases of Lyme disease.

During an unrelated admission, I met a man named Mr. C., a veteran of the Second World War, who gave new meaning to the term “family history.”

“My grandfather was a slave,” he said, touching the white stubble on his face. “Came away with 2 mules and 200 acres when he was freed.”

Mr. C. left Alabama with his mother in 1930. He played the trumpet in high school, landed in Iwo Jima towards the end of the war, and became the first African-American master plumber in Pittsburgh.

I loosened my tie and leaned back in my chair, my limbs feeling suddenly heavy. Mr. C. went on, stopping to rest only after he’d put all six of his kids through college. I grew up swaddled in privilege, and I’m just hoping to get my five-year-old through another year of preschool.

Isla was born on Valentine’s Day, a coincidence that was supposed to deliver my wife and me from the holiday’s tedious expectations. Instead, with two girls in preschool, the night of February 13th has become a jubilee of aggravation. I begin the festivities by hastily—and

improperly—assembling Valentines. Later, my wife steps in to correct my mistakes while I drive a cookie cutter into rock-hard rice crispy treats. By the end of the night, both of my palms are bleeding.

This year, Valentine’s Day and Ash Wednesday coincided. It’s been a while since I took the time to have my forehead encrusted with the remains of cremated palms, but I still get that warm, guilty feeling when I see all the “good” Catholics who did.

This Ash Valentine’s Day—in addition to feeling lapsed-Catholic guilt and attending on the wards—I was on the spot in our division’s “Clinical Reasoning Conference,” which features one anxious faculty member struggling to resolve a complicated case presentation while his colleagues and learners enjoy a hot lunch. Like the contestants on *Press Your Luck* who chant “no whammy, no whammy, no whammy,” I was reciting “no rashes, no rashes, no rashes” right up until the chief complaint was given.

When they got to the physical exam and displayed a picture of the rash, it didn’t really look like anything. “Eczematous dermatitis” was as close as I came to an intelligent comment. I looked out over the audience, and noticed several medical students deciding not to ask me for letters of recommendation.

After a sufficiently awkward silence, I was allowed to phone a friend—our most senior hospitalist—who offered “bullous pemphigoid” as if that should have been obvious. Most of us found this odd since the photographic evidence looked neither bullous nor pemphigoid, but my colleague assured us that we were witnessing a prodromal state.

The conference came to a perfunctory conclusion after that, as if someone had just blurted, “He’s dead. Bruce Willis is dead!” midway through *The Sixth Sense*.

All month, I’ve been teaching an elective for fourth-year medical students called, “Narrative, Literature, and the Experience of Illness.” When one of the students remarked that she found some of the selections a bit dreary,

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I wanted to point out that we were exploring illness, not the satisfaction of health and vitality.

I went home that night and laid down on the floor and let my girls land pile-drivers against my listless body. I'll admit—grappling with big existential questions on a daily basis can be kind of exhausting. Sometimes, it feels right just to lie there and let a two year-old treat your body like a trampoline.

On top of everything, my wife and I have been house hunting. Our current house is so small we had to divide Isla's birthday guests between two parties on separate weekends

(one bunch of resilient helium balloons; two different cakes). Mainly, we're looking for a structure large enough to place the two year old's incessant demands for fruit snacks and "wheely cheese" just out of earshot. That—and we're looking for some taller trees.

I met a man last month who'd been sent from another hospital to confirm a growing suspicion that he had terminal cancer. I went to his room just before discharge armed with "wish statements" and expecting perhaps a tearful goodbye. Instead, we talked about the native trees of West Virginia; how much

he was looking forward to walking among them.

On Tuesday, I signed my service out to a friend and opened the back door to find the temperature was touching 60. The dwarf willow that stretches across our tiny lot was still naked, but I could tell she was thinking about a change. From the patch of dirt that Isla and I had stuffed with tulip bulbs last fall I saw a few tentative shoots beginning to rise. But winter in Pittsburgh is never fully in the rearview until at least mid-May, so I covered the tulips with burlap before stepping back inside to fulfill my promise to write. **SGIM**