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Seasonal Affective Reorder

Which reality is capable of a pause?

Sarah Ruth Bates



IT'S THE SECOND-LEAST ATTRACTIVE NEW ENGLAND SEASON, AND MY mom and I are on a walk. The least attractive New England season is the gray sludgy stage of late winter, when the leftover snow has cohered into gritty piles that refuse to melt. We're just past that. Last fall's leaves carpet the ground, still whole. The snow preserved them, the sun has melted them out, and they look like they might've just fallen. The world's simple, here: creamy sky, pen-sketch trees, leaf carpet.

We're climbing the hill behind the park. It's the closest wild space to our suburban house. Not so wild: You can see the football field where the high schoolers play. Fenced yards delineate the edge of these woods. It's less "idyllic sanctuary," more "where the high schoolers escape adults." But it's still the woods: maples, pines, leaf-covered ground. I know these are last fall's leaves, and this *now* is the inhale before spring. If I'd been dropped here without knowing the date, though, I wouldn't be able to tell if it was a late fall or an early spring day, snow coming or going, days shuttering or opening.

I'd flown home from graduate school in Arizona a week prior, planning to stay ten days for spring break. I had not yet flown back. Instead, I taught and took classes from my childhood bedroom. My parents and I walked most afternoons, often near water: the Charles River or a reservoir—lush excesses to me after months in the desert. Fog hovered above the water, and droplets condensed on pine needles. It felt like decadence. I'd been living where spots that show up blue on the map run dry more often than wet.

Time passed, and felt like it didn't. My life, resuming, would have happened in Tucson. The world had, impossibly, paused. The usual time markers meant nothing. Events got postponed. They'd still happen—same place, same people—but in an indefinable *later*. No classes or teaching or talks or parties or groceries or appointments—for you, too, I know.

AT FIRST, OUR DAILY NEIGHBORHOOD WALKS REQUIRED ARMOR: MASKS BUT also hats, gloves, and boots for the cold. I borrowed my dad's long underwear. The snow didn't melt, but stuck. I threw snowballs at my parents (gently). They laughed but wouldn't fight back. Lame.

On various Zoom calls I watched the natural light in Arizona windows not fade, as my face darkened. I refreshed my email for word on when I'd be

By the Charles River, "the staticky hum of news and anxiety quiets." TROY ALMEIDA

expected back in classrooms. *We are assessing the situation.* Crocuses up. *We are not sure at this time.* Magnolia bloomed. *We will not resume in-person classes this spring.* The maples pressed out celery-green buds.

These days, we often walk in the meadow near our house. The grass is patchy yellow. The landscape's not ugly, but it's scrubby. In a usual year, around this time, the colleges roll carpets of sod over their own scraggly grass. This year, they are skipping commencement and leaving the grass to grow on its own time. Here in the meadow, it will be a while. The robins look shabby, too, their red breasts not yet vibrant. But there is no shame in looking like you've had a hard winter.

SOMETIMES, EVEN BEFORE THE VIRUS, "REAL LIFE"—LIFE IN AMERICAN society—seemed to me imagined, and absurd ("business casual," fistfights over sports teams). That's magnified, now. The pandemic has punched through the walls of our sets.

In the Julio Cortázar story, "La Noche Boca Arriba," the protagonist slips between sleep and wakefulness. He's lying on his back in the doctor's office—then on his back, about to be killed in a ritualized sacrifice. The story begins at the doctor's, but it ends with the sacrifice, revealing that world as the binding plane of reality. Cortázar's trick relies on the reader's assumption that the first known world must be the real one.

I talk to my grad school cohort from my parents' backyard. They say I look green screened into my background. The scene I'm in appears faked.

Walks are interludes, breaks, from "real work" at the computer. But which reality is capable of a pause? I walk, and remember again that the natural world is happening, as it always continues to, and I am just running in place inside a small and walled-off part of it. In the woods, the staticky hum of news and anxiety quiets. The pines have put out their new growth, bright and tender as a pear. The red-winged blackbirds scream, *conk-ka-REE!*, stopping for nothing and no one. Why would they?

That line, *If a tree falls and no one hears it, does it make a sound?* The arrogance of it! We thought our human-made world had inevitability. Then, we stopped it. So much less of it was essential than our egos wanted to believe.

I call the outside "the woods," even when I'm in the desert, because this is my nature. I know how to trust a foot planted on granite, wet or dry, lichen or clean. I know the give-spring of a wooden bridge through a muddy path. This particular wild is what I am a beast of.

A RARE GENETIC DISORDER MAKES PEOPLE UNABLE TO SLEEP. IT COMES ON IN adulthood. When it comes, it kills. The mind and body cannot stay on all the time. Rest has to balance activity. You have to go into the putting-back-together place sometimes. It's not an exact analogy, of course. I don't need the woods to survive. But I need the woods to do well. I forget that, sometimes. That forgetting, and the attendant wondering how much it really matters that I do well if I'm getting a lot done, that is a symptom of the spell that the woods breaks.

In the meadow, the grass has grown as high as my knee. I watch the wind whiffle it. The sky is as bright a promise as you can believe. I admire it, and I love it, and I loved it gritty and snowy and scraggly and brown, too.

My dad says the cure to jetlag is to walk outside during the sunset. You speak to the animal of your body in a language she understands. These months unfold that exposure on a grander scale. I'm showing my body the seasons. *Today* the maples have unfurled their leaves, like a thousand thousand tiny bright still-drooped umbrellas, a thousand thousand brave forays back into this world. I watch them, smell them, walk under them. I am readjusting my body to the cycle of change.

SARAH RUTH BATES is a writer and second-year candidate for an MFA at the University of Arizona. Her essays and interviews on adventure, medical ethics, and life have appeared in this journal, the *Boston Globe Magazine*, WBUR's *Cognoscenti*, and elsewhere. Read more at sahruthbates.com.