

BLACKBERRY STEPS

NON-FICTION

Anna Koester

Around the corner from where I live sits a cemetery. It's lined with three long paved paths that wind through the gravesites and surrounded by trees that muffle the ambient noise from the adjacent interstate. The cemetery offers a quiet place for a walk on this warm April afternoon. I'm drawn here because, although the world in the midst of a pandemic has quieted to a murmur, this silence feels peaceful rather than threatening and empty. It's quiet everywhere, and I'm drawn to the particular silence offered by the trees that compose the woods surrounding the cemetery.

A few trees are scattered between the gravestones. Those markers that are nearest the entrance date back at least two centuries. Most of the sandstone is cracked, while others are missing large sheets of slate, chipped away by decades of brutal New Hampshire winters. Some of the names etched in the gravestones echo those on the surrounding street signs; others are completely unfamiliar. I pass one that reads simply "Baby Girl Seaver," the only reminder of the infant who lived for just one day in late September, 1935. Moss covers the ground, a pocked carpet, unvacuumed for years. Further up the hill are the newer graves, the more recently departed marked by shiny marble and silk flowers. Large oak trees, starting to bud, line the cemetery's perimeter, pushing back territorially into dense forest. There is a running trail back in the trees, but I'd rather stay in the sunshine. The warm beams that expand through the collage of trees dry up any dampness upon which death casts its cold shadow. I could use some on my own shoulders.

After one up-down in the cemetery, I return back across the street and down the eastern boundary of the boarding school campus where I live. All along, daffodils finger their way out of the dirt and toward the sun.

There are two loop trails carved into the nearly 100 acres of conserved land upon which the nature trail is built across the state highway from campus; the smaller of the two loops is around a half-mile round trip while the larger loop is just under a mile and far more wooded. The trails overlap for a quarter mile, and each path has a different but equally steep hill in the middle. It's a challenge whether walking or running, going up or going down, especially because the hills are covered in small pebbles, slick as a spilled bottle of pills. The rest of the fitness trail is gravel, dirt, and sand.

Even through my headphones, I can hear the crunch my feet make on the path. I feel the unevenness of the textures between pebbles and patches of grass. Rhythmically, my feet tap out the time of my morning, winding up the day's clock. I suppose if no one else will take up the mantle, it might as well be me.

In early spring, the pine trees here look like masts of a ship, bare of needles and branches until the very top. Some of the pines have the same dry, harried look I must have after months of winter and pandemic-mandated constraint. I find myself double-checking every stick I pass by to ensure it isn't a snake, sunning itself at last after the frost. I head straight home after tackling the trails: back across the two-lane highway, down Main Street to the gravel driveway and my front door.

I now walk in the morning before doing anything else. I check the weather, put on shorts and a tank top or a sweatshirt, brush my teeth, and pop in my Bluetooth headphones before heading out the door. I always play an informative podcast, usually Malcolm Gladwell's *Revisionist History* or *Reply All* on Gimlet Media, while my GPS watch clocks my mileage. Although my route is generally the same, the number of laps and direction on the fitness loops changes from day to day, determined by whether I have a little extra time or if I can see another walker on a path that I should avoid for fear of passing the virus between us. After about an hour of winding the trails, I've tightened my own internal watch spring and the rest of the day settles into place.

The noise of the state highway is only noticeable at the trail's mouth but soon the pines insulate the walkers below from vrooming motorcycles and trucks. I'm surrounded by the centenarian trees and their height humbles me. On the trail, the branches pull their arms away, laden with new leafy growth, and the ground brightens. Sunlight dries out any clouds, whether metaphorical or nebulous, and feeds the buds and sprouting greenery that line the path. The trees' branches have become heavy with the burden of sinewy twigs and leaves, arching their crooked spines further

toward the earth. I also notice how I relax among the smooth swaying of the branches, the clattering twigs tapping an asynchronous rhythm to that of my pace.

I take a deep breath in, hold it, and slowly let it out. I'm trying to make the physical world here on the fitness trail an internal and permanent part of my respiratory system; wouldn't it be great to breathe in the smell of trees and plants and always respire fresh oxygen? The trees stretch their limbs down inside my chest and blossom out into the shape of my lungs. I exhale out and relax my shoulders. There's nothing to constrict the flow of this clean air, freshly made—being in the woods doesn't require a mask.

Morbid air has settled under the pandemic, but it's here that I start to notice new life blooming. By late April, it is blindingly green. Fiddleheads shoot out of the pine needle forest floor, tightly curled fists that eventually blossom into oily, sweet ferns. The smell is almost artificial, the kind that lingers in my nose and on my tongue. The sounds have changed, too; I hear lilting birdsong from the chorus of my feathered friends and croaking pips from the toads near the river. The crickets hide their violin legs in the brush and chipmunks squeak as they dash across my path up ahead. I've come to prefer the conversations between the chipmunks and the frogs to the monotony of yet another exchange with a human about the pandemic. I've seen a fox darting into the woods, flicking dried leaves with its tail. Up ahead, large moose tracks are squished into the muddy path. I shake my head to rid it of reality for a little while longer and flow back into the cadence of my reverie. The present brings a calm that I hope will last until tomorrow's walk.

In May, the paths are lined with small white flowers, no bigger than a quarter each, with tiny spikes of stamen freckled at their centers. It must have been instinct that told me the white blossoms high up in the bushes were blackberries. I can't remember a time when anyone pointed them out to me for what they were, but I'm sure I'd seen them at a younger point in my life. They're pretty enough to pick by the bouquet-full and showcase on the coffee table. But I know better than to deprive the pollinating bees of their spring labors, so I leave the blackberry blossoms alone and keep walking, careful to avoid fox scat.

A heaviness has settled between my shoulder blades over the last couple of months. Now, I feel the weight lighten with the promise of new growth; the plants here are determined to succeed and thrive, maybe to spite the restriction of life outside the woods. A word from a philosophy class in college comes to me: *eudaimonia*, or "flourishing." The woods are now fragrant with sweet, woody balsam and the wet mulchy aroma of

decomposing underbrush. I slow my cadence and inhale deeply, taking it all in, and look up at the trees to watch the flow of the ferns. I see the flourishing forest life and find that I, too, flourish in this place. I'm able to break out of the clotted dirt around me and turn my face toward the sun. But the mosquitoes are hot, so I head back across the street toward home.

My birthday comes and goes with a quiet celebration. Normally, I take the day off from work but this morning, staying close to home, I simply walk longer—an extra hill in the cemetery, both loops on the fitness trail—a communion between myself and the forest. No longer just a place to escape the virus that has so acutely gripped the world, the trails through these woods have become my solace and sanctuary. The safe escape has come to feel like home.

It's June when I see the first green drupelets forming where the white blossoms once were. Now, everything is green with no more white to punctuate the brush. They're so tiny at first, the small fruit. Some are ground berries, flowing out onto the path from underneath the ferns, spilled from a bucket ripely picked.

After a few weeks, the berries are bright red and everywhere. They become so large (although not at all large by lab-grown grocery store standards) that they laden the upper branches and gravity pulls them to a near breaking point. The berries are shiny rubies the size of my thumbnail, plump with juice. Although they look good enough to eat, they still aren't ready to be picked just yet. A few more weeks on the vine and they will be nearly black and ripe.

I look forward to watching the blackberries ripen as I bear witness to their daily progress; sometimes a cluster of red berries will encircle a single blackberry in its midst, the lone berry identical to its vine mates in shape and size but differing in color. Others have frozen in their transition from green to red or red to black, the color washing across the berry like a mottled sunset. In another week, more red berries have blackened. The color never becomes completely inky; a deep violet contrasts starkly with the bright green of the trail's foliage. It's a color I don't normally see in these woods but it's comforting all the same. These tiny knots of black fruit reaffirm that the forest is alive and thriving while serving as a reminder that the world outside is getting sicker and more violent. Each little berry has survived predation, strong wind and rain, and morning frost. If they can show resilience, then so can I.

By August, all of the red berries have either morphed into their final blackberry state or they've regressed back into the ochre green that

symbolizes their expiration on the vine. Each day, there are fewer and fewer blackberries in the bushes; the deer leave behind small cloven hoofprints in the mud in exchange for a sweet snack. From my path, I witnessed the blackberries move through each stage of their life. The low-hanging berries that remain look inviting and sweet. I feel a small sense of loss as they disappear, but I remember the blackberries persisted through each stage of their life to ultimately provide for and nourish the other forms of life in the woods.

This summer, I've been able to see the progression from barren forest floor to lush brush. How lucky I am to have witnessed the growth of the little white blossom into a healthy vine of rich blackberries. How lucky I am to have found a reminder that survival has a cycle; outside my own bubble of existence, the blackberries move through their own rhythm, looping over the months from bloom to expiration.

Soon, the blackberry bushes will wither and frost, and the leaves on the path will brown in the autumnal cold. Time on the trail is undisturbed and constant, and I've come to enjoy the pace of my morning walks each day through the seasons. *One step at a time*, I think. It's been a welcome sentiment to find stillness in the face of that which is unpredictable and chaotic. Watching actively requires the observer to be patient and hopeful. Outside of the woods, in the space we call civil, hope looks like a return to normal. But inside, the forest carries on, ignorant to the human chaos surrounding it. The only difference is that the timetable of wilderness in nature is safe and predictable; here, I am insulated and protected. There is order, symmetry, logic in the steps. There's a pattern, a rhythm to the seasons and the growth that happens in the forest from birth to death. Here, I too am resilient.