

New Nonfiction by Bettina Rolyn: “Why Did the Chicken Cross the Road?”



I have come to do a writing residency at the *Museum of Loss and Renewal* in Molise, southern Italy, in a remote mountain village to escape the distractions of Berlin. Just as every writer does when they go off for a residency, in this case, with the added burden of Covid having prevented me from escaping myself for eleven months straight. I had been fighting the need to flee from myself for years, yet Covid closed my usual escape route outwards and made me turn inwards. And towards depression. It wasn't just the desire for Mediterranean sun but the name of this residency that got my attention: Loss and renewal. I am working on a memoir about my

three-and-a-half-year stint in the US Army as an enlisted soldier during the early years of the American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but it was not proceeding smoothly. For over two years, I reread my journals, wrote up notes and insights in fits and starts, fought back various pains, and despite writing fifty-thousand words, it wasn't moving forward after the bleak winter of lockdowns and isolation. I decided to focus on one chapter during my trip to southern Italy.

I arrive at the *Museum of Loss and Renewal* on a hot afternoon in July and after getting settled in my room, the curators show me around the little town. In the morning, I awake to the sound of tractors passing in the street below, the neighbor's chickens clucking, and roosters crowing as the village comes to life.

There have been periods of my life where every day, I consider my own death. *Should I stay, or should I go now?* Suicide is on my mind a lot. I can't remember the first time I thought about killing myself, but I was surprised to discover in my "self-research" that already as an angst-ridden teenager, I had written about it in my journals.

Watching the cult classic *Harold and Maude* as a teenager, I was less interested in the age gap between the titular characters and more in Maude's status as a Holocaust survivor and Harold's fixation on death by suicide. I spent several years in high school consuming every story and image I could get my hands on about the Nazi era. Photos of dead bodies, emaciated prisoners, piles of teeth, glasses, and shoes—it all fascinated me.

The iconic movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, traditionally aired on TV every Christmas, was also part of my childhood. The pivotal scene, of course, is where James Stewart's character wants to kill himself by jumping off a bridge because of the impending financial ruin of his community bank until his guardian angel intervenes. This is what crisis looks like: suicide as a

solution to our problems arises naturally in the human mind. Despite the taboo on discussing it and for its potential contagiousness, I'd like to think that I came up with the idea all on my own sometime around the age of nine or ten when I began contemplating my existence. You cannot contemplate life without death; being without non-being.

The curators of the residency have a well-stocked library and leave the novel *The Original of Laura (Dying is Fun)* by Vladimir Nabokov out on the table, somehow reading my mind. The book of notes for a work-in-progress was posthumously published by the author's son Dmitri, who wrote the introduction. Nabokov—who likes the em-dash as much as I do—always held a curious fascination. He also spent fifteen years writing in Berlin and lived a life of displacement; the loss of his homeland and the themes of sex and death echo in his work. In this story, the main character is an obese cuckold scholar who resorts to the pleasurable erasure of himself, a process that occurs in his imagination but fictionally appears real. “*The process of dying by auto dissolution afforded the greatest ecstasy known to man.*” By the end of the book, he claims, “*By now I have died up to my naval some fifty times in less than three years and my fifty resurrections have shown that no damage is done to the organs involved when breaking in time out of the trance.*”

I have suffered uncountable imaginary deaths. Sometimes by my own hand, other times in perfectly acceptable, nay, even understandable ways. Cancer is a top contender—even as loved ones die for real around me from the disease. There isn't a pain, bump, ache, odor, or other bodily irregularity or phenomenon that I don't suspect of being cancer at some point.

Although my ten-year-old self wasn't familiar with French philosophy, later, when I read that Albert Camus says in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, that the most fundamental question of

philosophy is whether to commit suicide, I thought, "Well, duh." Camus concludes that the most urgent of questions is the meaning of life because whatever higher purpose we ascribe to our lives will determine whether we will live (not kill ourselves) or even die willingly (in war) for that meaning.

In college, I took a seminar called "Theories of the Good Life," where we read, among other texts, Victor Frankl's famous book about finding meaning in life. He wrote it after surviving the Nazi death camps. He was already working on suicide prevention amongst students in Vienna before he was sent to Auschwitz, where his new wife and family were murdered. Later, he developed "logotherapy" and "existential analysis" wherein he identified three main ways of finding meaning in life: making a difference in the world, having particular experiences, or adopting particular attitudes. A helpful attitude may be, "The universe is fundamentally good." Or, "Every human being brings something unique to the world." I was down with that.

In the military, which I'd joined at the age of twenty-five seeking to "make a difference," I hoped to deploy and was prepared to die honorably, heroically even. I fantasized about stepping on a landmine in Afghanistan. I would welcome either death or to at least be rid of my right leg, which had been giving me so much pain during my enlistment. But because of the leg and back troubles, I instead was medically discharged.

With each episode of depression and crisis—when my suicidal ideation usually appears—I'm surprised at what challenges tear apart my ability to withstand the strain of existing in this human body, one that comes with so many pains and issues. One common denominator is that I have a tunnel vision of self-absorption and a warped sense of my place in the world. A

combination of "I don't matter" and, "I am the center of this universe of pain." The first such experience as an adult happened while I was in the pressure-cooker of army basic training. I had been under the special "tutelage" of a female drill sergeant who informed me that I was a piece-of-shit soldier one too many times. I snapped and believed her. I wanted to die. I considered how best to do so, and settled on our rifle marksmanship training, when we were given live ammunition. But I also wanted to take her out with me. There was even a moment when she crouched behind me on the firing line, ostensibly to help me make it through the test with a malfunctioning rifle and I could have turned around and shot her. I did not. Perhaps it was that spark of anger at her and the army for putting us both in this situation that got me through the ordeal with no-one the wiser about what had transpired in my head. By now, I have envisioned my own death in a million ways. Preferably an accident, but that's a fine line to walk. I used a lot of energy imagining my demise, and here Nabokov's description of Philip's exercise in *Laura* is apt: "*Learning to use the vigor of the body for the purpose of its own deletion, standing vitality on its head.*"

According to the various spiritual and religious beliefs toward suicide, it is considered either a sin, self-defeating, or ineffective. In the view of the world and afterlife that I was raised with, I knew suicide was frowned upon. It does not solve a problem; instead, it takes away the ability to solve it, ridding our souls of our body—which we need to live out this incarnation on earth. Later I learned the line, "Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem."

In much of the literature I have read about near-death experiences, when people return to earth and report on what they learned in their "preview" of the afterlife, the stories are similar. They say that souls who die by suicide are often tortured while stuck in between heaven and earth in a sort of

purgatory. They are unable to comfort those left behind nor move on to higher spiritual realms—for how long differs based on theology. Now, that's a bummer. This belief that our souls are eternal (and reincarnate) and the attitude that there's no quick fix to end it all kept me alive for a long time, but it did not prevent me from turning to such thoughts when in crisis. I have come to view the siren call of release from earthly chains now more as an indicator of how bad my situation has become. It's time to make necessary adjustments—even major ones that make other people unhappy, and also cause me to lose face. I must cancel plans, disenroll from school, seek help from professionals.

In 2012, I volunteered on a crisis and suicide hotline. I was contemplating a career change from linguist in the defense industry to therapist in the helping professions and wanted to get a taste for the job. Before being let loose on the lines, we trained in the Carl Rogers method of unconditional positive regard and learned that the fundamental goal of the hotline was to preserve life. One policy was that as hotline listeners—that's what we were called—we would not accompany people while they killed themselves. We were trained to intervene, by—in the most extreme cases—calling 9/11 and sending the authorities to the caller's house while we had them on the phone. This only happened once or twice during my tenure.

Figuring out how to answer people's concerns and know what to say was anxiety-inducing. I sweated through one hundred logged hours of answering the phones in a dank hospital basement in suburban Virginia, though the amount of time I spent on actual calls was probably only one-third of that. Those thirty hours were enlightening. Hunched over in a booth, organs on high alert as I strained to hear my way into the pain of another soul, I learned how a suicidal crisis goes in waves or cycles. The trick is to remove the means to implement the urge and

ride out the wave to safety.

During my hotline training, I also learned that in the US, more people kill themselves with guns than die in car accidents or homicides and I changed my views entirely on the second amendment. I learned compassion but also just how frustrating people who are in need can be. I was having a good year in many ways and ended by making a major decision to go to Europe to theological seminary and not study counseling. But a year or two later, amid a toxic relationship-induced crisis, I learned that it's difficult to do the trick of de-escalating on oneself, or rather, only possible to a point.

In late 2016, after deciding to take a year break from pursuing ordination into the priesthood after three years of seminary, I was searching for something to do for a year and processing a breakup. I decided to finally visit Spain for a week and check that off my bucket list, and on the descent into Madrid, we hit turbulence. It was the worst I'd experienced in all my years of flying. As the plane shook back and forth, up and down, and people cried out—I was perfectly calm and ready to die. I have done everything I came here to do, I thought as my stomach jumped up to my throat. I have traveled the world and followed my major impulses (to serve in the military and go to seminary). If this plane crashes, I won't have any regrets. And it was true, but it was also because I had ended a life chapter but wasn't yet 'out of the woods' to even see that I had been in a wood, much less a dark one. It took another year of wandering and contemplating the truth that although I had religion, as the expression goes, the more theology I got, the less I wanted to be a priest. A year of suicidal depression followed, and I realized I wouldn't go back to be ordained anytime soon.

In his esoteric lessons held in Berlin in February, 1913, the Austrian philosopher and mystic Rudolf Steiner said that God

is real and active where we see the destructive powers of nature; in autumn storms, in all shattering and disintegrating of things. I sat and watched the seasons pass outside my window and existed, being crushed by the manifestation of the divine. Slowly, once I let go of the idea of needing to do something meaningful in a foreordained, meditative, and godly way, moments of happiness returned.

When describing the difference between the “normal” everyday life versus the “esoteric” and supersensible one that can be accessed through meditation, Steiner issues a warning: “Exoteric life takes place in the world of cognition. We know something because we confront an object, look at it and make mental images of it. This changes the moment we meditate.” In advising the seeker of spiritual wisdom through meditation, Steiner cautions that “We shouldn’t immediately make ideas about what approaches us in this world [of supersensible reality]. We should just open ourselves, listen and feel what wants to stream into our soul.” In my case, however, I am not a very regular practitioner of meditation except for three years of attempting to know ‘higher worlds’ in seminary training. I already sense my mind’s existence astride the boundary of the exoteric and esoteric, between mental cognition and psychic reality. One in which often-unwilled thoughts of my own death are what stream into my soul, taking up an inordinate amount of “space.” When I opened the door further to this supersensible world, disorientation, depression, and death awaited. One evening last year, my ear began to hurt, and I thought immediately, “Oh, it must be some terrible disease and I will soon die.” I see signs in hypochondria. I read into my symptoms the hope that the journey is almost over. The plane is about to crash.

Steiner continues: “We must preserve absolute equanimity with respect to spiritual experiences, just as we should remain calm in everyday life with respect to all events, ideas, etc. so that we don’t get excited or upset.” Great tip, Rudolf.

When not describing the intangible world, Steiner does offer some practical advice for how to practice such equanimity, and it involves disciplining our soul's capacities for thinking, feeling, and willing. This much I have learned is true—there are ways to mitigate the inner emotional turbulence; but I have also learned to sense when I am in danger of being dragged down by an external situation, one that inevitably involves other humans. Why did the frog cross the road? ...

Because it was stapled to the chicken.

Sitting in my room in the village overlooking the Mainarde Mountains of Molise, I look down at my swollen fingers, the instrument of my intended work and they look foreign to me. No, not quite, they resemble my mother's leathery hands which are slightly swollen from arthritis and seventy-five years of work, but mine are now also covered in an angry rash of hives. The left hand has red bumps full of liquid bubbling up from my swollen flesh like poison ivy burns. Slowly bursting from the pressure after a few days, my body's juices ooze out of my finger like maples being tapped for their syrup. The itching on my hands and legs is maddening, coming in waves, triggered by even a slight mountain breeze upon my skin. Even many weeks later, the itching returns like the echoes of a bad dream. The first day I arrived at the residency, I must have encountered the cause of this reaction, but I have no recollection of what it might have been.

I have been in this situation before. In 2013, once I abandoned my career in the US defense industry and decided to attend seminary in southern Germany. First, I stopped by the eastern Mediterranean following an invitation to visit some pastors from my church who were holding an inter-religious peace camp in the hills of Galilee. After one night sleeping underneath the pine trees with the youngsters, I awoke with what I thought were mosquito bites all over my hands, feet,

and face. When they quickly turned into these oozing, itching sores, I saw the Kibbutz doctor who told me about the pine processionary moth. I was the only afflicted party in our group. This miraculous creature of the genus "Thaumetopoea," species "pityocampa" has microscopic urticating hairs in its caterpillar stage, which cause harmful reactions in humans and other mammals. The internet tells me that "The species is notable for the behavior of its caterpillars, which overwinter in tent-like nests high in pine trees, and which proceed through the woods in nose-to-tail columns, protected by their severely irritating hairs."

Although the name pityocampa comes from "pine and larva," the word pity seems most appropriate to me now. Pity-evoking is the only word for a skin rash. It's hard to hide and catches the eye. You can't help but be moved by either disgust or pity, in the best case. I am so full of self-pity it is literally oozing out of me. Did the pity come from feeling unattractive due to these angry hives swelling my limbs, or was it always there and just now coming to expression?

There are certainly many things that I am angry about but do not say. There are truths I want to shout out to the world that are unsightly and unpleasant about what I have done and experienced in my life. I am trying to write them in the form of a memoir, but I'm blocked. In the meantime, my skin will reveal it as literal and metaphoric markers and warnings. These are expressions of my attitude towards the world I've encountered.

One morning on the mountain, I read the introduction to *The Original of Laura*. In it, Dimitri describes how his father's downward spiral to death started with falling in the Swiss mountains while pursuing his hobby of lepidoptery, the study of butterflies. In the cooling late afternoon of that same day, I found myself walking up the hill to the last house in

the village on the left, where I had intended to visit Clara, an elderly woman recently widowed earlier in the year. She said to stop by anytime and meant it, but once I finally got myself up the single road, past the village's old houses, to ring at her door, she wasn't home. Later she told me she was picking out her husband's gravestone. I followed the road upwards on its rough-hewn sun-bleached cobblestones, which ran parallel to one of the many stone walls that crisscrossed the mountainside.

During World War II, the Americans came through here on their way north from Sicily, having beaten back the fascists in bloody battles throughout southern Italy. They fought the Germans here in the Gustave Line, which practically runs right through the village, in the winter of 1943/44. They even built a road still named after "the Americans" to access the remote mountains of Molise in the slimmest part of Italy's boot. The curators tell me about a Scotsman who fought against the Germans in southern Italy but upon returning home met an Italian from this village, and so returned to Italy for good. He stayed on the hill for the rest of his ninety-two years. That's one way to deal with the aftermath of war.

Along the white stony path, I found myself chasing butterflies to capture them with my iPhone camera, far from civilization, and contemplating the purchase of a house in this village that I had just left. There are many empty houses in the towns of the region. Many of the children of families who'd lived here for generations having long since moved to the big cities of Europe, though some continue to return to build more energy efficient houses or move to lower altitudes, where the winters are milder. The house I looked at came with a plot of land, upon which fig trees already grew. The idea of having an orchard and chickens providing fresh eggs daily and growing my own food in the garden captured my imagination.

If I wandered off the path here, I had been warned there might be shells, unexploded ordinance, and other nasty surprises

like scorpions and wild boars awaiting me. I had seen the boars already, hurtling through the underbrush uprooting everything in their path—hard to miss—but also the seemingly invisible moths and caterpillars which caused me grief. As I wrote and searched through my journals—trying to put them in some meaningful order in my memoir—plumbing the depths of my memory, I found undiscovered ordinances of thoughts and feelings, a seemingly endless supply of trauma and suicidal ideations that I had confided to my journals but otherwise hidden from those around me, and even myself for so many years. I had been mentally living a life on the edge for decades, where thoughts of suicide would lie waiting behind every bush, stone, boulder, or obstacle in my path. Whenever I was challenged and felt like I had no more choices out of a bad situation, I had thoughts of ending it all. And now I was stumbling upon them in my journals and wondering how I'd even made it this far without hurling myself off some cliff.

The rugged beauty of this landscape appeals to me because it is not just pretty, or quaint, or touristy, but real. Molise is beautiful in its wildness. It wasn't always quite so wild. It has been worked, yet it is a work in progress as the re-wilding of this region takes over. My hosts explained how over the past fifty years, nature has been slowly reclaiming these hills and hiding the many stone walls and paths that had been cleared over generations for small plots of land to be cultivated. In the photos of the area at the WinterLine War Museum in the nearby town of Venafro, the landscape looks vastly different. There is history here, but there is still potential amongst the rocky terrain and partly deserted villages. People like me are coming here in search of something quieter and safer, like the curators of the Museum who created such a residency for artistic reflection. Some things look better with the passage of time; others just appear different.

I imagine a life where I live in the house that I saw for sale

in the village. I have chickens in the yard and a garden, and I harvest figs. If I had chickens—whose lives I would worry about preserving—and a plot of land to care for would the incessant thoughts of my own mortality fade? Keeping busy certainly is one way of keeping the hounds of existential angst fed and quieted for a while.

I wrote a children's story about chickens once. I wrote it mostly in my head and like Nabokov, whose characters in *Laura* never get fully fleshed out, my chickens never saw the light of day on a page. They were inspired by real ones my sister kept in Pittsburgh for a few years. Her young children loved to chase them around the small backyard. Every night the hens went into their plastic coop, but one night, as my sister later relayed, several of them managed to flee into the uppermost branches of a tree in their yard. She had to chase them around in the dark for what seemed like an eternity, so intent they were upon staying in danger.

In my story, these imaginary hens escape their coop and have an adventure in the big city. The story began thus: Miffy, Laurel, and Hilary lived in the small backyard of a big house in a big city. Their coop was opened every day, and they had free range in the yard to search for tasty bugs and juicy caterpillars. They often flew up and roosted on the boughs of the big pine tree next to the house—especially when they got tired of being chased and hugged by their small human friends. From the tree branch, they could see into the big house. From high up, they could see over the fence into the neighbor's yard. They could also hear the shouts, whoops, cries, laughs, and bits of conversations about life out in there in the big city. One day, Miffy—she was always the one starting such debates—said to Laurel and Hilary: "What do you suppose it's like out in the big city?" And so off they went, out into the wilds of urban America, encountering curious raccoons, venomous vipers, pensive pigeons, and friendly foxes who share

with them how to stay alive in the big, scary, cityscape. Eventually, they return home, safe and sound.

Is it too obvious to say this story is an allegory? That I long to return to the heavenly coop is a simplification. I am not a mere chicken. I yearn for a sense of meaning in my life. Having pursued it in various external titles, roles, and institutions for years, I am on my own now.

There are many ways to deal with suicidal thoughts; the stigma attached to seeking help for mental health issues is thankfully disappearing. I also know from other friends and acquaintances, not just myself or suicidal exes, that while so many of us remain depressed, we are not alone in our suffering. We often need other humans to assist us with getting through the worst of the wave of crisis. Other times, we are being called to connect with our purpose. The Quaker theologian Parker Palmer writes about his depression in *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*—the title itself giving away the key to healing—and connects our ability to hear and thus speak the truth of our selves with maintaining our mental health.

My dad used to tell jokes around the dinner table. Here's one I remember: A man goes to a psychiatrist and explains that he thinks he is chicken feed. They work together for months until finally, the man comes to understand that he is not chicken feed. Just as he's saying goodbye, he says, "Wait, Doc, I have one last question. I know that I'm not chicken feed. You know that I'm not chicken feed, but what about the chickens?"

When do we label ourselves something like "suicidal"? Once you tell someone that you've had thoughts of suicide, they never look at you the same way again. After my formative experience in the military where I was constantly overworked, muscle fatigued, sleep-deprived, harassed, and pushed over the

threshold into suicidal ideation (all without deploying!), I learned to be wary of having everything taken from me or "giving my all." It still happens that things become too much, but I remain protective of my internal and external resources, most importantly my soul resources. I try to avoid situations where I might be stuck in a situation that I do not desire; I always have an escape route. My life depends upon it.

Rudolf Steiner also said, in the same lecture given in Berlin almost 100 years ago, quite helpfully that the Gods protect those unprepared for what lies on the other side of the threshold of the visible world by giving us pleasure and enjoyment in creative activity in the physical world. So here I stay, on the haptic side of the line of consciousness and immateriality: writing, eating, and when possible, making merry. Besides writing out the truths of my life and turning hives into literary hay, I've learned to let the imaginary chickens save my life. Creatively sending the hens out on adventures or calling them home to roost again. Just getting to the other side can be enough. This is an attitude that Victor Frankl would endorse.