

Ask me what I did this year
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Written at Saturn's Return Farm and Inn, San Juan, WA

Every morning, I wake up to the honks of wild geese. Recently, they have been multiplying. Each day, it seems, hundreds more flood the fields and pick away at the grass. I like to imagine them phoning home to friends and relatives, telling them to steer towards San Juan. Telling them to come quick before others discover this emerald island where mountains meet sea.

The rubber soles of my Doc Martens are coated with goose poop. I Google “Can you eat Canadian geese” and consider what it would take to capture one. Then I think about the geese calling home again and saying ‘Even the good ones kill.’

I took the year off of medical school to ... what was it again? I am having trouble remembering now. To write! Yes, I took the year to write. Write what? I think it was a memoir. Oh, it was research. Yes, research. That’s what every good surgeon-to-be does. Author a paper. Learn statistics. Or maybe it was to concoct future plans. Dream up the hospital I’ve always wanted to build. Ideate.

I wonder if the geese have elaborate plans for their journey south each year.

I must confess: I have not written a memoir. My mom is uniquely relieved of this fact—her fear of our dirty laundry exposed lay rest another day. I worry I have not learned much in the way of statistics, either. Except if you count measuring how frequently the ferry runs on time (never). And I have no more built the hospital of my dreams except to decide it must have a fireplace in the waiting room, like our island emergency room has, along with views of forest and sky.

I’ll tell you something I did do this year. I hugged a tree and felt it hug back. I found the pulse of its trunk like a true femoral line. I paused long enough to learn the difference between cedar and Douglas Fir. Now it’s so obvious I can’t believe I ever couldn’t tell. The sloping branches of cedar. Her peeling bark. The deep furrowed trunks of fir. His flat, soft needles, shooting up to the sky.

I knelt on the rocky beach of Dead Man’s Bay and sampled the brine of bullwhip kelp and bladderwrack. I learned the name for the candy green moss that hangs in forests like spider webs—Old Man’s Beard—and saw an Orca whale in the wild. I spoke to the mountains and they spoke back. I watched a baby fox cross the road.

For the first month all I did was sleep. My body, like a densely packed mattress ripped from its packaging, opened up to the world and let out a sigh.

I have been told that “taking time off” can be a red flag for surgeons. They might think you don’t know what it takes. Some trees take 30 years to fruit.

During one of my first weeks here, I woke up late to a meeting. Two permaculture experts were visiting the farm to help us evaluate the land.

It was early September and Western Washington was still full of sun. Hot coffee splashed from my mug onto my knuckles, most of it now on the dirt as I darted from the house towards the back hay field.

There on the hilltop stood an older man pointing at the trees. His white hair was stuffed under a baseball cap, tipped just enough to reveal pale blue eyes underneath. The hair on his cheeks suggested the white used to be blonde, and his plaid shirt stuck out through the zipper in his cargo shorts. The pink, leathery skin peeking out from underneath his clothes spoke of years in the sun. Thick, green toenails fell over the ridge of his flip flops. He was at least a head shorter than all of us standing around.

I caught my breath and tried to make sense of what he was saying. He was pointing to an invasive species of trees that had taken over this part of the property. I had never noticed them before. He was talking about tree grafting. How you can take a young tree and attach it to the amputated branch of another. The invasive species are skilled at rooting down wherever they are, so instead of just wiping them clean you can leverage their presence by grafting something more valuable up top—pear, perhaps. The life force of the invasive tree, he explained, will push into the grafted tree and allow it to flourish.

I laughed to myself, feeling the analogy was too heavy handed. Like skin grafting I offered. Yes, exactly like skin grafting, he replied.

Doug, as I learned he was called, returned my smile. Of course, he said, pear trees can take years to fruit, so the benefits aren’t as immediate as surgery. For this work, he added, you can’t be short-sighted. You must think about what will be here in 20 years. Or a hundred. There is no quick fix in nature.

I still worry about the eyebrow raised when I tell my attending I spent the year planting 400 cloves of garlic in the rain. But each morning when I hear the geese, I find myself getting closer to the truth of me. I feel the rally cry of the mountains and the soft pull of the moon.

You can ask me what I did this year, and I can tell you, but I’d rather talk about the trees.