

Something Like Vertigo

ELIZABETH RUSH

THE SUMMER I MOVED BACK to New England was also the summer my father came down with vertigo. At least, we called it vertigo, though, in truth, we didn't know exactly what it was and neither did the doctors. My parents were visiting Montreal when it started, this sensation of not really knowing which way was down.

My father thinks a sandwich caused his vertigo. He tells the story like this: in Montreal, he went to a Hungarian butcher and ate slice after slice of winter salami. For months, he had been avoiding nitrates and salicylates, which his kinesiologist had told him were making his mind sluggish. Eight hours after eating the cured meat, my father suddenly felt as though he were tumbling downhill. My mom woke up to find my dad's pupils tracking left to right, left to right, in an endless loop. He was so dizzy he could barely stand. In order to walk to the emergency care clinic conveniently located in the shopping mall adjacent to their hotel, my father had to run his hand along the wall for support. After the appointment, he staggered back to their room, vomited in a trashcan, and they checked out.

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My mother drove their red Jetta back to New Hampshire while my father looked at the dashboard and tried to keep from throwing up. He even brought a handful of plastic bags just in case. When I visited them the next weekend, my father walked as though he were drunk, staggering back and forth past the Joe Pye weed and the poppies we had planted in the backyard together. He made me walk in front of him. If he fell, he did not want to take me down, too. My inclination was to reach out a hand whenever I saw him lurch, but the abrupt motion at the periphery of his vision made him even dizzier. He would bark, “Don’t,” and reel back from the confusing movement, then drop his head down even farther to try to limit just how much of the spinning world he took in.

Vertigo is caused when the crystals in your inner ear become dislodged.

My father’s crystals were fine.

It was the neurons that connect the inner ear to the brain that were a problem.

“None of them are firing,” one doctor said.

The next doctor said some of the neurons were firing and it might be a problem *inside* the inner ear. This was the same doctor who said it could take a year for my father to recover.

Which was better than the diagnosis of the physical therapist, who said there was nothing else to be done.

One doctor said it was probably viral.

No one said it might be a brain tumor.

Then they gave him an MRI to rule out a brain tumor. And we all celebrated when the scan was clear, even though we had never said the word *tumor* out loud.

My father didn’t have vertigo; he had something like vertigo.

And that was the extent of our knowledge.

OTHER ANIMALS, not just humans, can come down with something like vertigo. If I hold a bee in my closed palm, it will fly away dizzy-seeming and whirling. Lambs and ewes can get “the staggers,” a fatal kind of vertigo caused by sheep bot flies that lay larvae in the mammals’ nasal passages. As the larvae develop and grow, they move into the sinuses and gnaw. The insects can eat the mucus membrane that shields the animal’s neural pathways, the synapses that bring the mind

and body into conversation with one another. The animal will shake its head, rub its nose along the ground or on fence posts. Eventually, the weak ones quit eating and collapse.

While my father claimed a salami sandwich triggered his vertigo, I thought that perhaps his condition was caused by something less literal. I wondered if what happens to lambs with “the staggers” was also happening to my father, at least in a metaphoric sense. Had the connection between his mind and body, between how he thought he ought to live and his actions, begun to deteriorate? And if so, what was the cost?

For years, I had listened to my father complain about his work as a commercial real estate broker. At first, he said it was boring; then he said developers were thoughtless, concerned not with finding the right fit for their space but only with extracting the most profit possible. More recently, my father had begun to proclaim the world simply didn’t need another strip mall or superstore.

“When are we going to learn that infinite growth is a myth?” he would say. When I lived in New York City, I visited once every couple of months. In the morning, over tea, we would talk about the new editorial board at *Harper’s*, the *New York Times’s* increasing climate change coverage, or Thomas Frank’s latest column on the intolerance of the left in the *Guardian*. Then, my father would get in his car and drive into his office to try to broker another lease agreement between some developer and some franchise.

My father is a man of little patience. Little patience on the telephone with his personal banker. Little patience for poorly manufactured plastic gadgets. Little patience for those who cannot step far enough away from the immediate moment to imagine the impact of their actions on the longevity and health of a complex system.

His growing understanding of ecological collapse meant that the longer he stayed in real estate, negotiating contracts with Dunkin’ Donuts, Perfumania, and Verizon, the more he became the kind of person for whom he had little patience. The longer he stayed, the lower his overall patience reserves dipped.

One night over dinner during the holidays, he snapped when I asked about his work. What I had intended as an innocuous query he took as an

insult. In the candlelight, my mom mouthed the words *I have to live with him*. I laughed.

But it wasn't all that funny.

"Go sell solar panels" we said. He knew we were right. But still he stayed.

A FEW MONTHS after my father lost his ability to tell the difference between up and down, I attended the Rising Seas Summit at the Sheraton Boston Hotel. I was there on a Metcalf Institute fellowship designed to deepen the relationship between environmental writers, like myself, and the scientists on whom our work depends. The ceilings were covered in strings of globular crystals like dewdrops and ten-foot-wide linen lanterns likely dyed far away in the cadmium-ripe fabric factories famous for polluting the rivers around Dhaka. Beneath those looming lanterns and ridiculous lights, I heard about all of the different and conflicting predictions that scientists were making about the future of sea level rise.

I heard about the ten feet of rise predicted by 2100.

And the two and a half to five feet of rise predicted by 2100.

The twelve feet that will settle over everything if the cork to the West Antarctic ice sheet is popped.

And the three additional feet of sea level rise trapped in the ice sheets of Greenland.

The eighteen feet of sea level rise if the planet heats another two degrees.

And the thirty feet of sea level rise if the planet heats another two degrees.

I heard about the Maldives buying land in Fiji because their entire island nation will be underwater.

"It's not a question of *If?* but *When?*" Ben Strauss from Climate Central said. "And that is the extent of our knowledge."

Then he showed a series of photo-realistic images of the United States' major coastal cities. Since we were in Boston, Strauss started by showing us what 4°C of warming would look like in Boston. "This pathway corresponds roughly to business as usual," he said—that is to say, if we stay the course we are on now. In this scenario, we would emit slightly more CO₂ in the next eighty

years than we have in the last one hundred and sixty, since the start of the Industrial Revolution. As a result, our greenhouse gas emissions would continue to increase at a steady rate, relatively unchecked, until century's end.

Light blue water washed over just about everything except Beacon Hill and the northernmost corner of the Boston Common.

Newbury Street was all underwater. That was the street where I bought my first Ani Difranco record. The street my father played no small part in revitalizing in the late eighties by leasing townhouses to European bistros and the above-mentioned record store. The street that paid for my college education. The street that made my father so much money he could now consider leaving his profession for less lucrative, more environmentally friendly work. The street that transformed our formerly working-class family (my granddad sold seltzer door to door) into one with options and the wavering that privilege affords.

On the screen above Ben Strauss's head, that street was gone.

Then Ben switched to the rendering that showed the 2°C of warming that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recommends to avert catastrophe.¹

Newbury Street was still buried under the blue of hypothetical salt water. As were Boylston and Beacon streets, most of the Prudential Center, and all of Copley Square. MIT was underwater. So was Northeastern, The Museum of Fine Arts, Fenway Park, half of South Boston, and about half of everything else. Including the tiny Italian restaurant in Downtown Crossing where my father and I ate together before seeing *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares*, a Bulgarian woman's choir. That was my first concert. I was six.

In the ethereal hyper-light of the conference center, I saw that no matter what we do, the landmarks by which I have long navigated are going to be underwater.

WHEN SCIENTISTS TALK about climate change, they describe "tipping points" and "flips." When we have pumped enough carbon into the

¹ At the time I am writing this, the international community is about to enter into discussions about how to respond to global climate change. The proposals currently on the table will likely lead to 3.5°C of warming by century's end.



atmosphere to change the climate fundamentally, and when the old climate with its temperate sweet spot is something we can no longer regain, we will have caused the Earth to “flip.” Many think this has already happened or that we are flipping right now. Old laws give way to new ones, and Newbury Street slips beneath the slack tide.

My father’s illness has absolutely nothing to do with the science of climate change, and the science of climate change has nothing to do with physical flips or tips. And yet we describe both phenomena with similar language: one is vertical and the other horizontal, but both depict the moment when the body is suddenly lost in space.

I am interested in the alchemy of issues, for an issue is what climate change has become and I fear it will get stuck there in the untethered and abstract space that surrounds many of our most pressing and deeply politicized concerns. I am interested in how to make climate change tangible, how we might transmute it into something we can taste and see and touch. Can the disorientation that accompanies my father’s vertigo somehow become the disorientation that comes with sea level rise? How did hating his job become environmental; how did aging become hating his body? And isn’t it all really just about fearing what we do not know?

THAT FALL, I was teaching a course at Bates College on the impact of climate change on literature. We read all the standard authors: Bill McKibben, Elizabeth Kolbert, Gretel Ehrlich. And then we read others, like Alison Hawthorne Deming, whose book *Zoologies* is a kind of bestiary of all of the different animals that are currently going extinct. Deming writes, “I have faith in natural processes, in the intricate systems of reciprocity that keep nature from tilting out of balance. I may belong to the last generation for a very long time to feel this faith.” When I ask my students if they were raised to think of nature as measured and immutable—an awesome and ultimately independent actor—they say no. They know humans have changed the planet in previously unimaginable ways. Deming is exactly fifty years older than they are, and thirty-five years older than I. So, she was a little off in her predictions. Hers was the *second* to last generation to believe.

Like Deming, I grew up with the myth of the Earth’s “natural balance.” It made me think that planetary change, if it occurred, was always slow and steady—like the tortoise who beat the hare. But about the time I graduated from high school, I read an article by Elizabeth Kolbert about a set of ice cores exhumed in Greenland which told us that 15,000 years ago, the planet abruptly warmed by sixteen degrees in a period of fifty years or less. She would eventually report that during the three centuries that followed, sea levels rose fifty feet. The change was sudden and dramatic, drowning land where humans had previously lived. As it would turn out, this study was part of a larger paradigm shift that would reconfigure our very basic understanding of ecological processes and the time scales in which they normally unfold. Now we know that Earth’s climate doesn’t steadily evolve over time; it jerks back and forth between different equilibriums.

As I write, I receive daily updates on just how radically the planet is changing. The fall after my father came down with vertigo was full of climate records. That October was the warmest on record and had departed the most dramatically from the average of any other month in human history. That same year, 2015, the planet reached an average global temperature 1°C warmer than in pre-industrial times, which is halfway to the 2°C of warming that the IPCC agrees is the uppermost limit before we reach a “tipping point.”

In the five decades since Deming was in college, “faith in natural processes” has come to be seen as a quaint notion, which fosters distrust amongst those who understand we are currently transforming the climate at a rate unprecedented in human history. The very idea that nature is strong and elemental and separate from us humans is now considered out-of-date, myopic, and self-interested, a way to keep pursuing the “business as usual” that Ben Strauss warns against. Faith has become foolishness, and either way, Newbury Street will be underwater. It is not a question of *If?* but *When?*

That fall, I began to suffer from an acute form of anxiety. I began to dream of nameless storms so large they left my house lightless and full of water. I wondered if there was a threshold between immersing myself in my subject matter and drowning in it, and whether I had crossed that

line. My faith in natural processes had morphed into gnawing uncertainty. At night, hurricanes washed into my dreams, their unprecedented storm surges rearranging the furniture and my family lineage. The commonly held notion that what has happened will happen again, that there are no new stories—this idea becomes fat with water, fully saturated, then it, too, slips beneath the sea’s dark surface.

So where does all of this leave us?

In a world with more water in the oceans than our old projections of the future foresaw. This is a world fundamentally different than the one my generation thought we inherited, but it is ours nonetheless.

Would it help if I describe the shovel my father gave me and the story he told me when he did—that it was his father’s shovel and an expense far beyond the ordinary sixty years ago? It has a smooth, lathe-turned handle, which widens to fit the hand, and a round point head, which my grandfather painted bright orange just so he would know the shovel was his. He used it to dig up the potatoes he grew in the field behind his home in Aurora, Ohio.

Would it help if I told you that, today, I used the same shovel to turn the compost and the winter-stiff ground where I plan to plant a row of tomatoes once the weather warms? Would it help if I ride the ten miles out to Jacob’s Point salt marsh, where the black tupelos that line the Narragansett Bay are all dying of saline inundation? And what if, instead of bearing witness, instead of photographing their exposed, prophetic forms, I nodded, strode past them, and kept going right into the ocean?

THE SUMMER I MOVED from New York City back to New England to teach creative writing and environmental literature at Bates was also the summer my father came down with something like vertigo and started to walk with a cane. The first time I saw him with his stick, I felt sick; it was then I knew that one day he would die. Almost every moment after that felt like a kind of gift, if I looked at it right.

My father’s body taught him what his mind had worked hard to deny: the way he was living his life no longer squared with his beliefs. He

had passed the tipping point. So he learned a new navigational language. Instead of relying on balance and sight to stay upright, he began to rely on touch.

If my father could only go on touch, he could no longer drive a car.

And if he could no longer drive a car, he could no longer commute to his office in Portsmouth.

And if he couldn’t go to the office, he couldn’t take on new clients.

Without new clients, he stopped being a commercial real estate broker.

My father stayed home and started painting the house.

“When I paint, I have a third point of contact: my two feet on the earth and my paintbrush against the house,” he told me over the phone.

“And that additional contact is grounding; it helps me regain my balance.”

Because he wasn’t working, he called me on my cell phone most days. Because he wasn’t working, he painted all of the window frames. And then he painted the shingles. He cooked for my mother and prepared the garden for winter.

Eventually, he could drive again, but he chose to stay at home “to keep getting better, to attend to the things that matter,” he said.

And then my father came with me to Ubud, Indonesia, where I was presenting at a writers festival. Wildfires were raging across Java and Kalimantan. They said those fires would pump more carbon into the atmosphere than the United Kingdom’s entire annual output. And then the amount became bigger than the entire annual output of Germany. And then the amount of CO₂ emitted by the fires on a daily basis equaled the average daily emissions from all U.S. economic activity. I thought about the two degrees of warming that would drown Boston, and then the four degrees of warming that would drown Boston. And then I stopped thinking about it, and my father and I went out for dinner.

To get to Warung Mendez, the local canteen, we walked single-file along a pockmarked and poorly lit sidewalk. From behind me came the sound of my father’s walking stick tapping the ground, following the contours of the earth so he might continue to put one foot in front of the other, albeit more slowly, more deliberately than before. ■