

FOUND POETRY

Of all the things I anticipated doing after receiving my vaccination, I didn't expect that picking out my own bananas would be memorable. But there I was at Wegmans supermarket in Woodbridge. It was the first time I'd been shopping that store in over a year. The last time I'd been there, customers had already begun hoarding for the pandemic, and the entire meat department had been stripped bare. A store worker shook his head and told me: "It's like locusts were here!"

Now I was back, having driven from Metuchen listening to Frank Sinatra singing: "It seems we stood and talked like this before...." I pulled into parking area 9. The only way I could remember where I parked was if I always took the same spot, and I remembered the number by the Beatles' "Revolution 9."

At 10 in the morning, the store was largely empty — Duraflame logs, daffodils, and dahlias for sale outside the front door. I moved through the aisles, masked this time, rolling my mini-cart past the bags of ripe-smelling clementines. The store was hushed — and the experience of shopping felt fragile, strangely emotional, like entering a cathedral that sold seven varieties of hummus. I'm not a serious shopper, but maybe you have to be barred from entering a grocery for a year to discern its charms.

How refreshing and empowering to pick my own salad! My own blueberries! And especially my own organic bananas, which I lingered over, selecting the precise transition of green to yellow. I smiled at a woman shopping in the produce section who was wearing a mask and white bunny ears, not that she could see this. The wicker shelves of the bakery were filled with half-loaves of garlic Tuscan bread, still warm; I wanted to devour the entire shelf.

Maybe part of my reaction was related to all those months of bulk Costco deliveries: three plastic bags of chicken thighs, 24 eggs, 10-pound bags of oatmeal that Lynn feeds to the herd of deer she seems to have permanently adopted. Now it was a palpable pleasure to buy what I wanted and not be burdened with the huge, uncrushable delivery boxes which now filled my garage. An article Lynn showed me about a beached whale full of plastic bags and Styrofoam had left me feeling even worse about remote buying. It was yet another reason to taste the joy of picking up and squeezing a single avocado instead of buying eight in a net bag and watching half of them rot.

In my semi-exalted state, I'd neglected to purchase a number of items on my list, so I made another quick pass through the entire store. I had to keep reminding myself that since I'd been vaccinated I could roll my cart around leisurely without fear of collapsing by the sour cream. A worker stocked the shelves with moist bags of organic carrots, and I lingered over the remaining Passover chickens, all on sale. I bought two cans of garbanzo beans and organic hamburger patties, though I rarely ate red meat anymore.

I scanned my Wegmans card through the register for the first time in a year, and I half-expected the machine to say, “Where the hell have *you* been?” It was raining lightly as I rolled my cart towards area 9. I felt like crying, laughing. Could this darkness and solitariness actually be ending?

After I loaded the trunk, I looked at my \$101.64 receipt: Vanilla Dove bars dipped in dark chocolate, Limonata soda, Chobani coconut yogurt, Pennsylvania Dutch extra-wide egg noodles! It didn't take a former English teacher like me to recognize a poem when he saw one.