

THE BEAUTY OF THE BONE

In 1965 John Updike wrote *A Child's Calendar*, a book of monthly poems. The verse about November has a line that's always stayed with me; it describes bare trees: "The beauty/Of the bone." The opening stanza reads: "The stripped and stately/Maple grieves/The ghost of her departed leaves." Of course, Updike himself is now a ghost....

November is a month of anxiety — both political and personal. Lynn and I recently rented a farmhouse in Vermont for a week, and the trip served to italicize our mutual hypochondria. Lynn's been one all her life; I'm a more recent convert to the certainty that I'm continually on the verge of extinction. It's either easy or hard to be a hypochondriac during times like these. Easy because there's always a new vague symptom being added to the unending list of possible Covid harbingers — mysterious aches and pains — who doesn't feel them? Or it's hard because if you merely mention you don't feel well, you receive cold looks of terror, and you're grilled about where you've recently been. A visit to the dentist is like finding yourself on the film set of *2001*. Lynn's dentist recently entered her office wearing a space suit, a face shield, and an N95 mask. Now *there's* an image to inspire a patient's confidence.

On our trip to Vermont, we stuffed two grocery bags full of supplements. They took up half the backseat: a TENS machine, an Alpha-Stim electro-cranial stimulator, portable air ionizer, neck massager, 4% lidocaine patches, arnica gel — and a standing army of unpronounceable pills and tinctures whose purpose neither of us can clearly remember. Maybe we heard them mentioned on the radio while we were stuck in traffic? We carry not just quercetin but Mega-Quercetin, alpha-lipoic acid, triphala, super boswellia serrata, red yeast rice, black cumin seed, taurine, grape seed and resveratrol, acetyl carnitine, white willow bark, lutein and zeaxanthin, Zn-Zyme Forte, malic acid, and, of course, lion's mane mushroom extract (to name just the front row.)

Since I've known Lynn, she's believed she's had every illness known to humankind: from Sjögren Syndrome (illnesses with umlauts in their names are especially sinister) to Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. (Hyphenated names are also good.)

Mark, who runs the health food store downtown, happily suggests possibly remedies for these various ills — carefully crossing out the printed price on the pill bottles and hand-printing the discounted price. Happily, he usually tells me a good joke as well. ("A man and woman are travelling on an overnight sleeper. Upper and lower berths. They're not married....") The jokes probably help as much as the remedies, but since they feature annoying women, I don't usually repeat them to Lynn.

The only individual I know who travels with more supplies than we do is our dog Nellie. In addition to the high-end dog food we buy from the Scottish Dog downtown, there are her Stella and Chewy digestive enzymes, 5 mg. famotidine tablets (to reduce her stomach acid), Impact vitamin supplement, Pet Calm (she's as anxious as we are), Apoquel (to quiet her scratching), non-rawhide chew-sticks, and her one-eared Lambchop to provide her with comfort during the microseconds she has to be alone.

Which is all God's way of saying: *You know, I'm thinking maybe you should just stay at home....* This would probably be my father's advice if he were still alive, but Lynn isn't buying it. I secretly do. I think we should get through November by staying at home, studying the leafless trees on the front lawn silhouetted against the fog-shrouded moon. We might consider, as Updike did: *The beauty of the bone.*