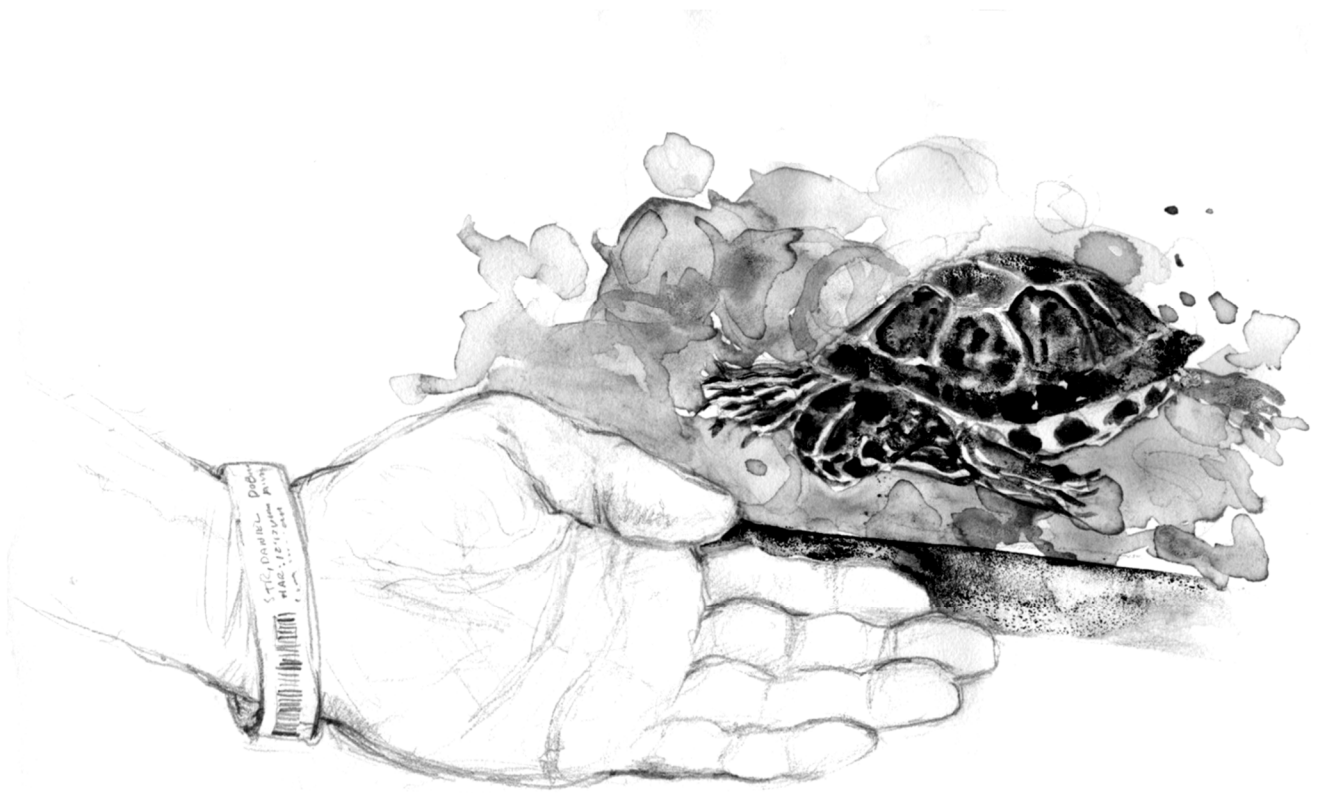


The manuscript is best viewed in a two-page spread so that the illustrations face corresponding text

Coming Up for Air

How a Turtle Helped Us Through Illness and Recovery



Written and Illustrated by Suzanne Stryk

For those who need care and for the carers

And for turtles everywhere who make this
planet even more astonishing

Love does not consist of gazing at each other, but in looking outward together in the same direction.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*.

*The world asks of us
only the strength we have and we give it.
Then it asks more, and we give it.*

Jane Hirshfield, "The Weighing"

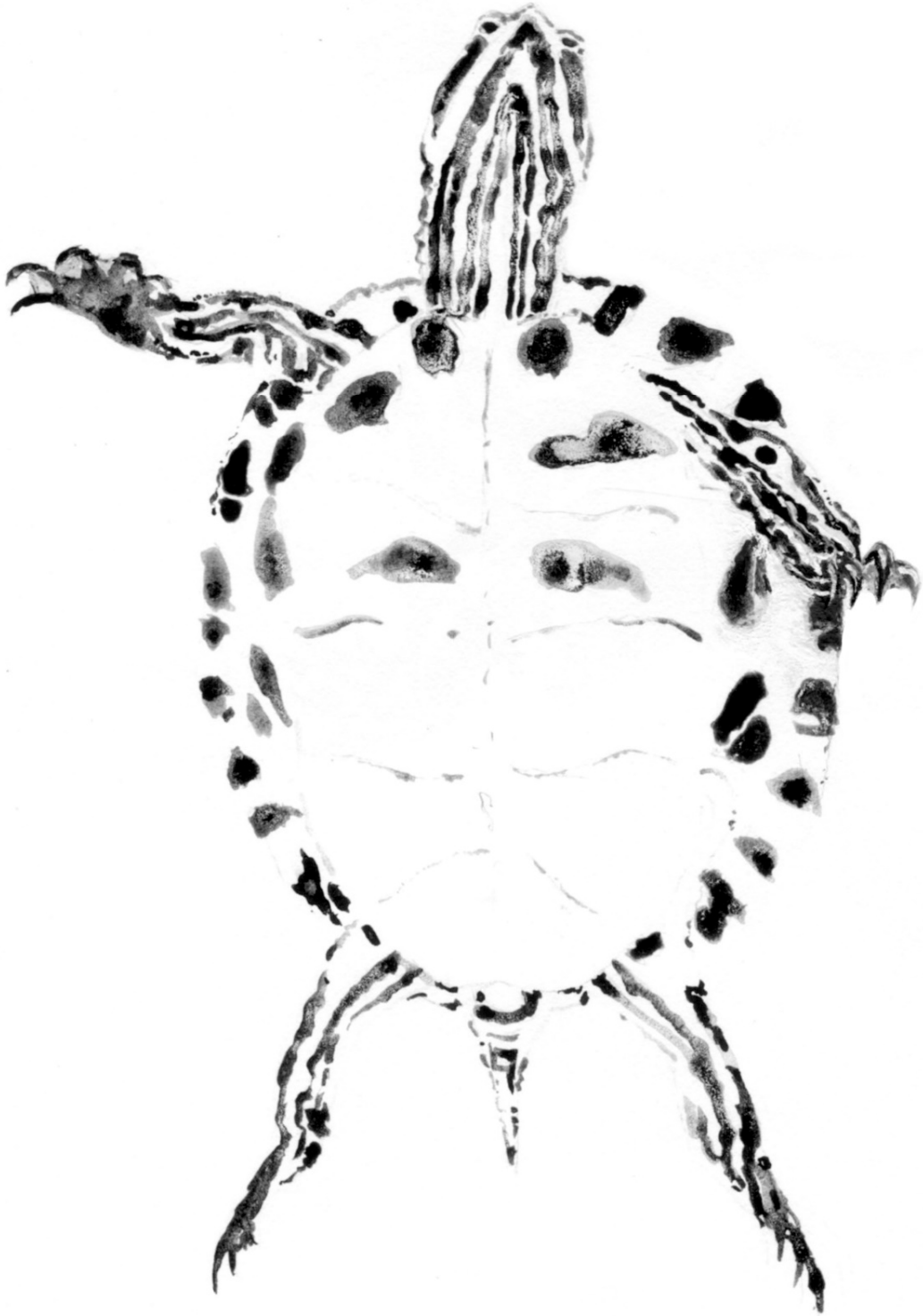
A Note About This Book:

The pictures came first. During 2022 and 2023, I sketched our turtle Pab (which rhymes with “Bob”) and my husband Dan after his surgery and during the following months of chemotherapy. In hindsight, I realized that these sketches together created a story. The written narrative, then, serves as the mortar holding them together.

We stand in the dark by the turtle tank. It's 5 a.m. I switch on the basking light and throw Pab some BugBites. She paddles to each floating pellet, snapping them up one by one. Then she plunges, zigzagging this way and that around pebbles lining her 20-gallon as if she's confused. She is. It isn't her usual wake-up time. Now, with a front foot delicately touching a faux rock and a back foot gently swaying to keep her watery place, she pierces the surface with tiny pin-prick nostrils to come up for air.

Dan tells her, "I'll be back soon." I say we'd better get on the road.

As we drive to the hospital, a sliver of moon hangs in the twilight sky. It's late September, the morning of Dan's surgery to remove a cancerous growth in his small intestine. Soon, we're in the prep room, me working his arms into a blue cotton gown, securing the white ties, and stuffing his street clothes in the big plastic Ballad Health Personal Bag. Dan's backpack leans against the wall, swollen with his writing notebook, books of poetry, and even a dictionary (*you brought a dictionary?*); I inhale slowly, exhale, and clench my teeth. When a pony-tailed anesthesiologist jostles in, a nurse scoots me out. In the waiting room I'm handed a SmartCall pager—a blue disk like a hockey puck with a small screen—which will alert me to what's happening during surgery.



It's a long day. First, I hang out at Coffee Clinic Cafe, sipping bitter Autumn Roast while reading Helen Macdonald's *Vesper Flights*. I'm not in the mood to draw, but I still flip open my sketchbook randomly to an image of Pab sleeping, almost like I need to see it. Why? Before I can answer, the pager buzzes—I jump! And then, all at once, the damn thing vibrates, buzzes some more, and blinks! I juggle it to read the ribboned message, “Surgery on Daniel has begun.”

I could use fresh air, sun, and birdsong. So I head out through automatic doors to stroll around the parking lot, down rows of gleaming metal beasts, swaths of green turf, and neatly trimmed privet under which a song sparrow hops--what does it find to eat in this manicured habitat?

Back inside the hospital, as I twirl the revolving shelf of inspirational books in the gift shop, my pager buzzes, blinks, and vibrates: “Surgery going well.” (Proud to say this time I don't jump.) Now piano music drifts through the lobby, tugging me toward a baby grand where a pianist tickles the keys into “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'.” As he plays, I watch veins loop over taut tendons fanning from wrist to fingers and study liver marks splayed like an archipelago over his head's translucent skin. A sign on the piano tells me this is the hospital's beloved “Piano Man,” eighty-nine-year-old Charlie Lawson.



Noon. What a delight to discover a sushi chef in the cafeteria! I jostle my tray with its six delectables through the checkout line and find a vacant table. But before one kelpy salmony bite of sticky rice reaches my mouth, I struggle to tear open the little plastic pouch of soy sauce with my slippery fingers, then my teeth. Frustrated, I puncture the pack with my house key—*splash!* Soy everywhere--on the table, my blouse, the *Bristol Herald Courier*. Circles of tightly bound delicacies amid splats of brown—a vision of the control and chaos that defines our lives.

And all this while Dan is on the operating table. I picture him circled by masked figures in green scrubs, like pollinators around a flower.

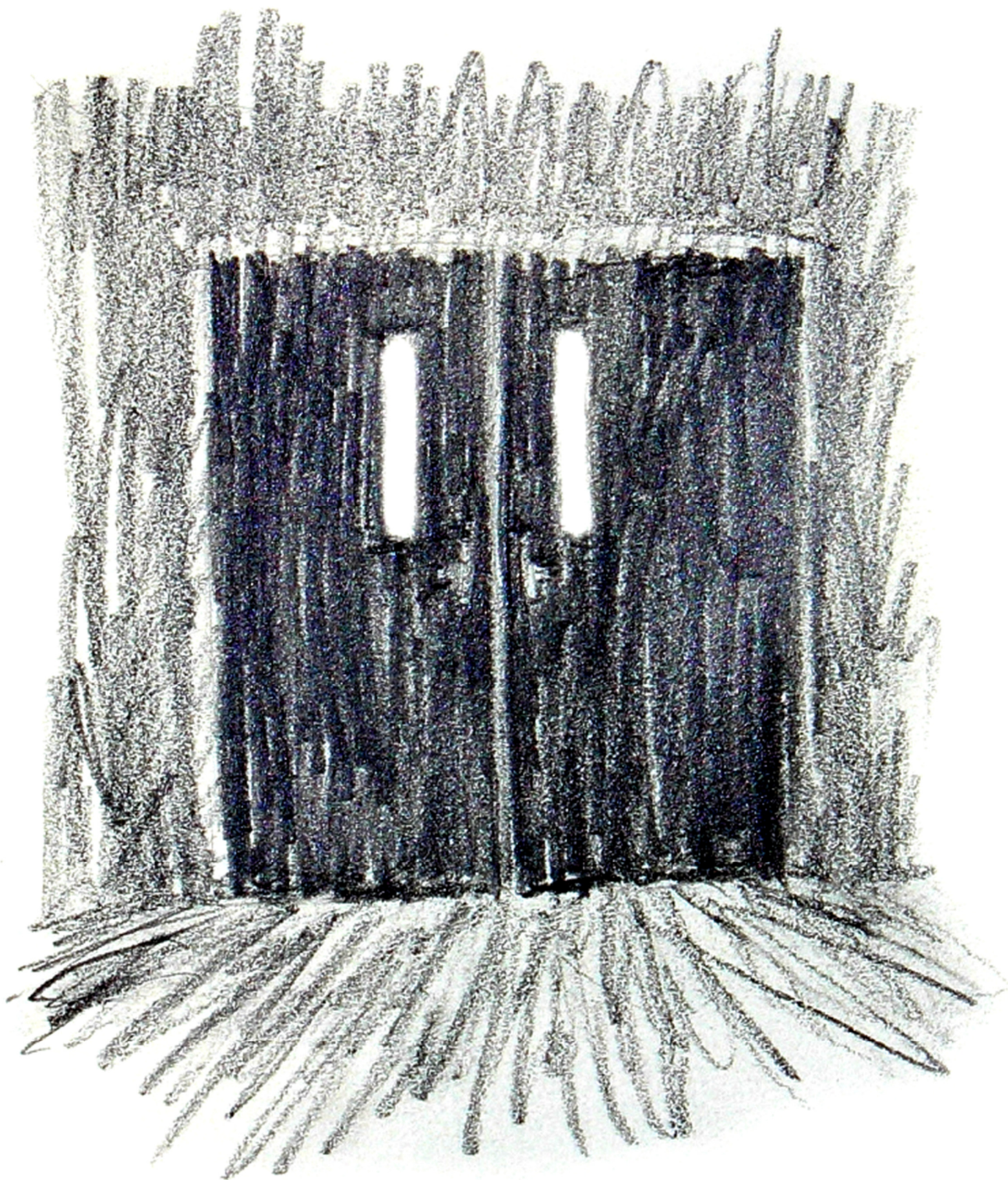


Back to the Coffee Clinic.

At 2:30 p.m., the pager alerts me to “Meet the doctor at the double doors.”

The surgeon matter-of-factly tells me, “All went well.” Behind him, the intern puts on his most gentle smile as if donning a mask called “Reassurance.” Then I learn about the “Whipple” procedure, that Dan lost not only his duodenum—that first section of the small intestine—but also his gall bladder and one-sixth of his pancreas. And that it’s all been re-hooked up. Or maybe he says “reattached,” but by now, I feel as if I’m adrift in a dream, trying hard to convey competence! My gaze drops, and I find myself staring at the surgeon’s broad, square hands with their fleshy fingertips, struck that these hands perform such precise life-saving work inside the pulsing, bloody, soft tissues of a living body.

Blood drains from my cheeks when he adds, “We found cancer in some lymph nodes.”



The next time I see my partner of 48 years, he's in Intensive Care, still knocked out by anesthesia. I pull out my sketchbook, blue-kneaded eraser, and pencil, press the graphite point to paper, create an oval for his head, add ears, mouth, and, yes, even the tube taped to his nose. Coaxing the line darker around all the tubes, a pillow point thrusts up like a foreground mountain.

I'm puzzled: Why did they put his glasses on him?

Dan blinks, opens his eyes, and whispers, "It's over." A long pause. He looks around, then asks, "How's Pab?" Out of the oblivion of anesthesia, in the jungle of bleeping machines, and amidst all the possibilities of where his firing neurons might latch, they land on our yellow-bellied slider.



I flip open my sketchbook to find a turtle pic for him. The first one I come to is a detailed drawing of her foot. When I hold it up, he murmurs, “Big. . . feet . . .” limply pointing his finger at my watercolor; the corners of his mouth tighten—do I sense a smile forming? His hand falls on the cool white sheet as if pointing is too exhausting. But before his eyelids shut and his head droops into sleep, he adds, “You can draw me. It’s okay.”

He didn’t know that I already had. But after so many years together, I already knew that “it’s okay.”



Day two in the ICU.

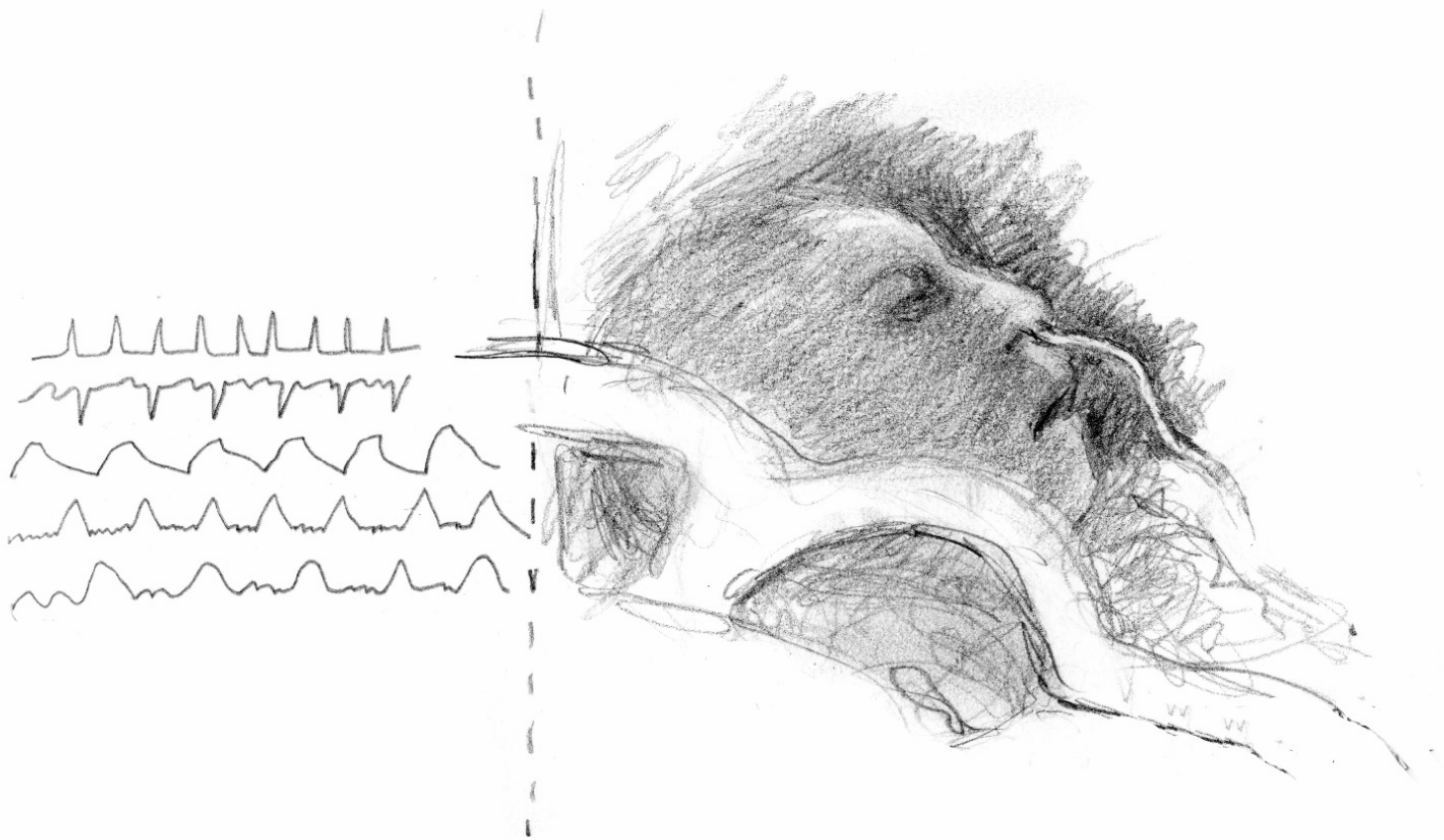
Dan's had a rough morning. His crazy heart beats irregularly, his blood pressure drops too low and then spikes high.

From the nurses' station, beyond the curtained door, I hear chatter and laughter. It's filled with so much joyful energy. I marvel at how they switch from this lightheartedness to the serious business required as soon as they cross the threshold. Meanwhile, in *this* room, machines hiss, beep, and click. I listen to Dan inhale and exhale, slowly, so slowly, over and over.



An overhead monitor's lines look like stitch options on a sewing machine, the embroidery type. How the heck do I remember stitches on a sewing machine? It's been over fifty-five years since I fed fabric under a bouncing needle to make a smocked blouse. But there you go.

Day three. Dan is in excruciating pain. I'm numb with helplessness. Every 15 minutes he pushes the painkiller button, which emits a joyful little "deedalee!"



I wander the hospital as he sleeps. On the lower level, sculptures perch on chest-high pedestals along a wide corridor of glistening tiles and beige walls: figures of arched torsos, heads and arms theatrically thrust back. They're casts of Frederick Hart's multi-figural sculpture *Ex Nihilo* ("Out of Nothing"). Further down the hall, a small version of the entire piece hangs, accompanied by a plaque that says the original is located on the west façade of the Washington National Cathedral. Hart wrote that the work was "an expression of creation, of divine spirit and energy" and that the figures emerge in a swirl from rough-cut stone "caught in the moment of eternal transformation."

"High art" in the bowels of Bristol Regional Medical Center, steps away from the bustling cafeteria filled with aromas of grilling and pizza fumes and around the corner from the men's and women's restrooms. My first response was to see the irony in this as if art were loftier than the everyday. But no, what happens in the gut is a divine transformation of energy, a miracle we take for granted until something goes awry. And what a miracle if Dan's plumbing will once again transform a bite of food into energy.

How divine when bodies function, allowing our minds to ponder the divine.



Days pass. Home every evening. My task? Simple: To make the house ready for Dan when he gets back. Are rooms walker-friendly? Will he be able to reach the bedside table? I mount room-darkening window shades in our grown son's room, where Dan will recuperate. I elevate the bed with "shoes" so he might easily get up and down. And I scrub, dust, and vacuum even under dressers where dust bunnies prowl. Even the old bathroom vanity gets a coat of white enamel inside and out (because the paint's cracking on the cheap old particle board, and, well, we might have a nurse visit, so my own vanity kicks in).

One night, I transfer the glass turtle tank from my lower-level art studio to our dining room. Once set up there (the low buzz of the pump filtering water, the aquarium heater set to 76°), Pab paddles frantically—all four legs flapping wildly—her big yellow plastron like the hull of a ship struggling to right itself in a storm. Why is she panicky when everything's pretty much the same? She's still in front of an east window. Nothing seems much different in her tank to me, but she possesses senses I'll never fully know. What I do know is that once home, Dan will see her without climbing stairs.



Back at the hospital.

Dan's pale gray hair wisps across the white pillow like cirrus clouds. I feel like a character in a novel: When did this story begin? Was it months ago, when a lump the size of a pecan appeared in his endoscopy? Or did it start when we heard the word "malignant?" Or way before that, when he became so anemic that no amount of iron could boost his energy? Before that?

As I passed others in the ICU this morning, many had family or friends sitting by their bedside. And I thought, "All these folks have a story." They, too, might wonder where theirs began . . .

"*Housekeeping!*" A call jolts me out of my reverie. Beulah wheels a creaking red cleaning cart into the room, her long, auburn hair dangling. Eyes closed, I'd know her cart by the squeak and whiff of Lysol. "Another day in paradise," she quips dryly—really, I'm not making this up, she said that. In her rasping, smoker's voice, she asks Dan. "How ya doing?" But she doesn't look over at the not-doing-so-well soul between metal guard rails as she yanks up the black plastic garbage bag. She's seen a lot within these walls. I wonder about *her* story.

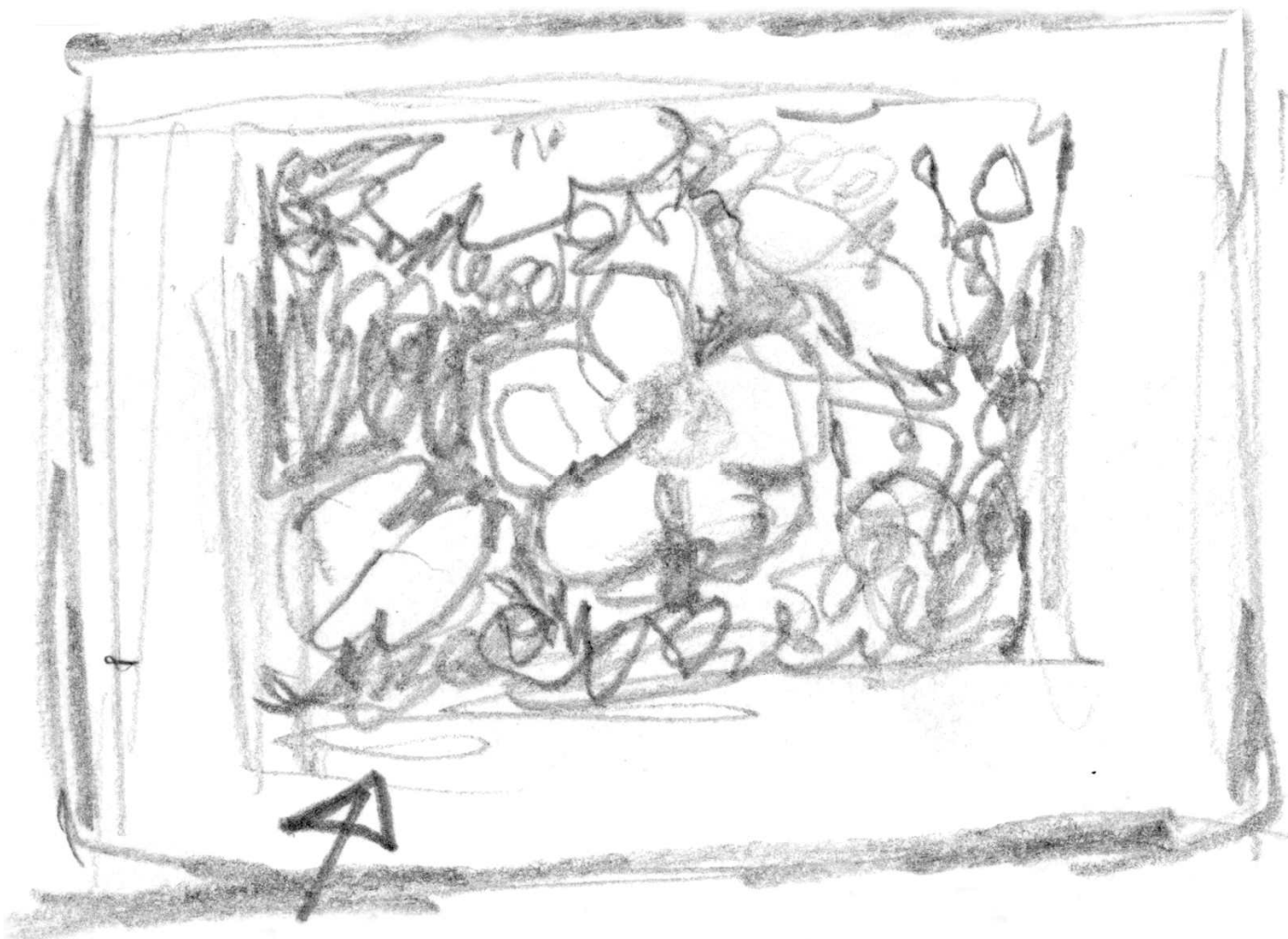


Days go by in this “healing” habitat. Surreal, really. Have you ever thought that there’s never been anything on earth quite like today’s hospitals?

I often exit the room when nurses change Dan’s bed or the physical therapists lift his legs and arms or sit him on the precipice of the bed, his now-boney knees trembling. Today, I seek refuge in the ICU waiting room. Yesterday, an old friend was here with her family, her wet eyes puffy, red. Her voice cracked as she told me her sister was dying.

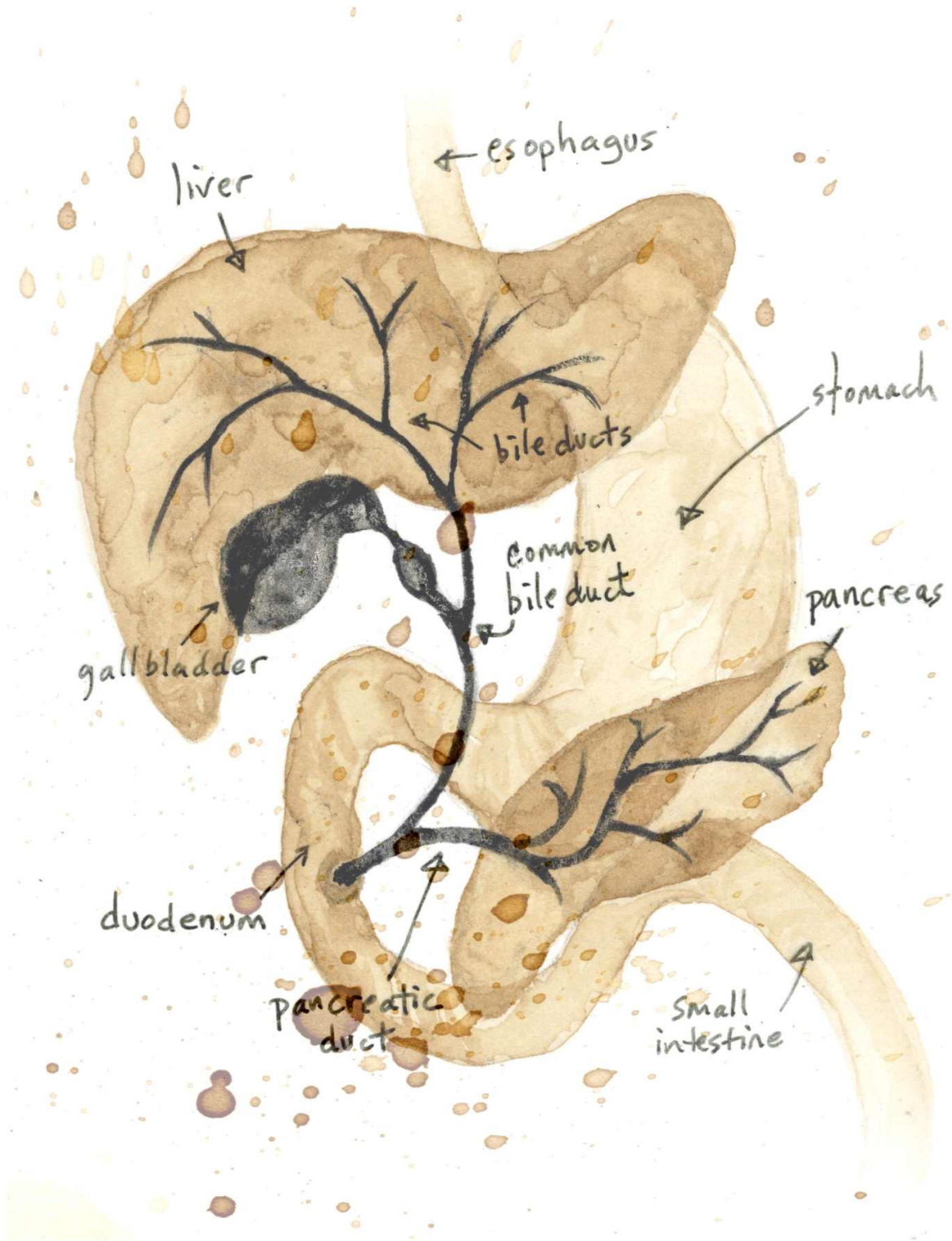
Today, I’m alone.

Over the sofa hang three photos. On either side are images of yellow flowers—cinquefoil, I think—set against blue skies; these flank a central one of a sunset or sunrise, I’m not sure which. I wonder if the interior decorator was thinking of beginnings, endings, or simply a pretty picture. It’s puzzling why nature remains comforting in a world that more often blots it out with air conditioning, phones, cars, and screen-viewing. But I get why ICU waiting rooms would have inspirational nature pictures, nothing to suggest storms or predators or decay or moody night scenes. Yet on an end table sit stacks of books: horror by Steven King, murder mysteries, tales of war woes. Maybe we prefer our fears packaged and isolated, put-downable?



No surprise I've thought a lot about human anatomy lately. We live so much in our heads, unaware of the heroics of our pancreas as it polices our chow, fine-tuning sugar levels. Or the coils of our intestines—Thanksgiving should thank *them*, those original food processors. And then there's that funny little organ called a gall bladder. Do you know it's a sort of bile Checkpoint Charlie between the liver and the small intestine? This very minute, as you write, Suzanne, all this stuff is going on inside you, and you ingrate rarely acknowledge it . . .

Then there's all the chemistry in my craw, which blows me away if I think about it. Which I don't. Real magic going on inside me just happens. Do I understand it? Not really. Haven't scratched the surface. Think for a moment of that sweet banana you ate this morning: try to imagine its mysterious journey inside the dark path of your gut. Try.



Another morning, another trip to the hospital. On the passenger seat lies a scrap of paper scrawled with “chapstick” in black sharpie—a reminder to stop at Walgreens. I will, but I’m early, so first I swing by the park.

Jutting out of Steele Creek Lake, turtles bask on a log: “3 red-ears and 2 painted” that “stretch necks sunward,” I write under my drawing. These are Pab’s brethren. How would she fare in this wild habitat with other sliders?

Before caring for Pab I didn’t know that turtles needed the sun’s heat to aid their digestion and its UVB rays to aid their shell’s strength.

Back in Dan’s room, smearing chapstick on his parched lips, I tell him about the baskers, say we’ll be going to the park again soon, “Just like old times.” He nods, but something in his expression tells me the nod is for me, that he’s not so sure he’ll be walking in the park anytime soon.

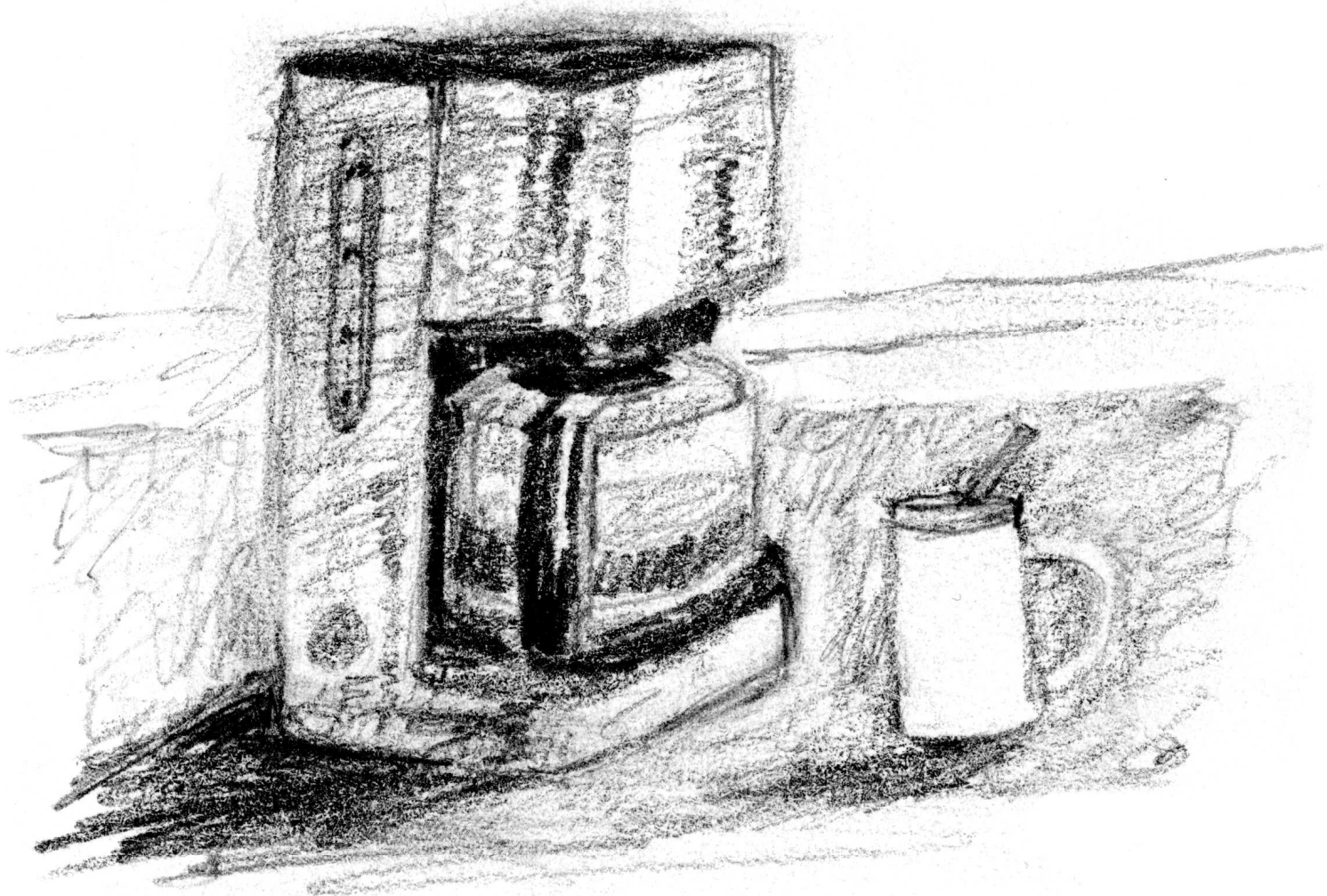


Fourteen beautiful minutes from the hospital parking lot to our driveway. I say “beautiful” because the rolling green fields and yellow, orange, and rust-brown leaves dapple hillsides along the interstate like a subtle Persian rug. Now, I’m home. Although I’ve welled with emotion during this time, I’ve not cried. Not until tonight.

Blame it on Mr. Google.

Because tonight I searched for ‘gall bladder removal.’ *Patients are often left with coffee intolerance . . .* I spit my chamomile tea on the screen and sob. Why? Because coffee is part of Dan’s quiddity—his essence. Much is lost over a lifetime, but we hope what defines us remains. Coffee—brew after aromatic brew, cup after cup, at home or in a coffee shop—infuses Dan’s sense of himself and his creative life. Or at least he thinks it does, and who’s to say that if we believe we need something, we don’t truly need it?

How will he ever come up for air without coffee?



Dan's lost over twenty pounds so he needs nutrition big time. He's prediabetic, and now after major surgery, he must follow a soft, sugar-free, low-fat, nutritious, bland diet. When his first full meal since surgery arrives, I lift the stainless-steel cover off the plate . . . *WHAT?* A pathetic hard slab of shriveled hamburger on a white bun stares at me like an eyeball, like some dietetic cyclops. Chummy with the burger is one measly green sweet pickle, a small pack of Heinz ketchup, and French fries. Really? Soggy, greasy French fries? And if that weren't crazy enough, for dessert sits a plastic cup of drab brown chocolate pudding—full-blast sugar! I fill out a complaint form.

The next day, when dinner arrives, I lift the cover: again, hamburger and fries. The only difference is vanilla pudding. "You've got to be kidding," I say to Dan, who moans. Fill out another form for the kitchen staff. Message the doctor's office. The next day, I would have bet a chunk of cash I wouldn't need to run down to the cafeteria again to buy Dan some suitable vittles. But no. I confidently open the lid: hamburger, fries, and *cherry Jello*. It's almost funny. But not.

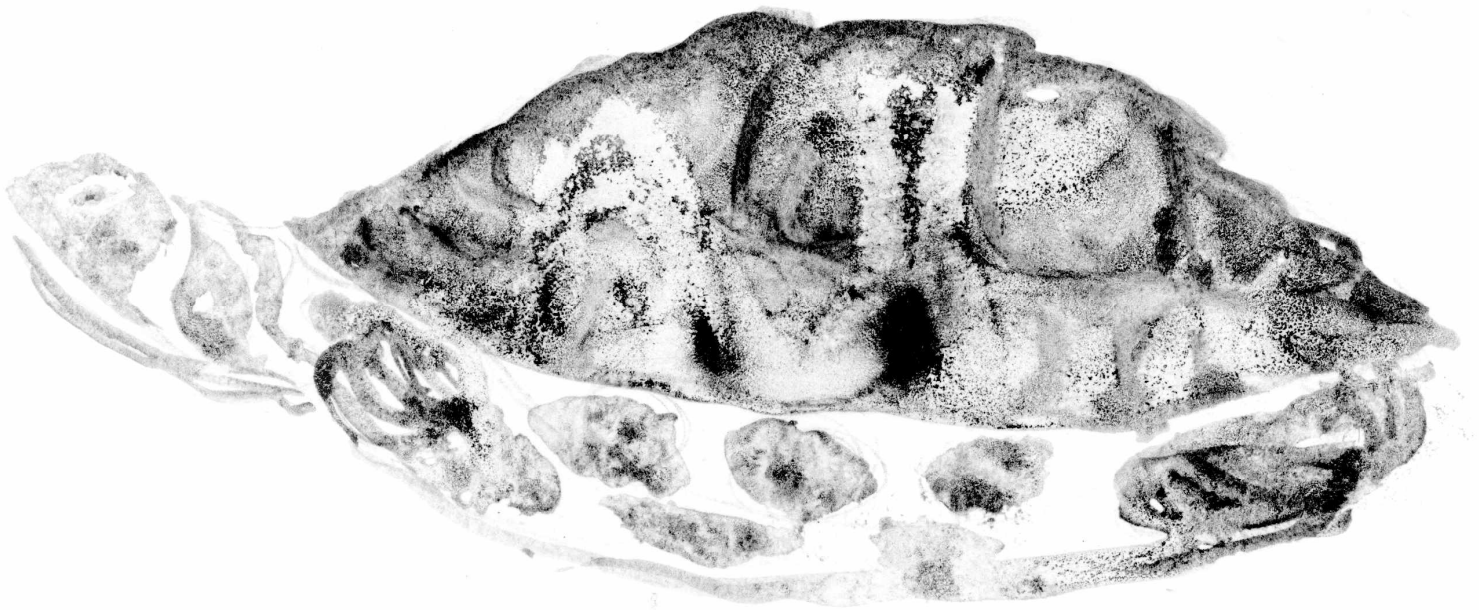
I'm told the food service is a franchise, not part of the hospital. Oh, that makes it okay, right?



Thank goodness one caring nurse gets the memo to the kitchen, so Dan's next meal is mashed potatoes, spinach, and tender chicken. What a kind, capable soul she is, so we're surprised to learn she grew up an orphan in nearby Wise County, left homeless by her parents' opioid addiction. How in the world, after such childhood trauma, did she not only survive but go on to earn a nursing degree to "help other people"?

She tells Dan about the new puppy she and her husband took home from the pound and how the dog's antics delight their children. He looks over at me and smiles faintly as if to say, "No, I'm not going to tell her about Pab."

I wonder if he will when I'm gone. Will a small-shelled thought pop up irrepressibly?



It's Sunday, 9:30 AM, the time and day of the week I've phoned my mother for decades. I scroll her number on my cell, push the green call button. "Hello?" Her voice is gravelly. At ninety-six, the "tickle in her throat" is but one of her many "challenges," as she nobly calls them.

"Hi, Mom. I found a nice place in the hospital to talk away from Dan's room. A foyer with lots of windows and sunshine. No one's in here today."

"Tell me how he's doing." *She's* worried about *him*. Soon, I hear paper shuffling as she finds her list of what he might eat once home. I'm listening when I see a bird dead under the plate glass, its pink feet thrust up like winter branches as it lies on its back in bark mulch.

"I'll write it all in an email," she says.

"What? Oh, yeah, please do, I could use some ideas," I say, pulling away from bird-thoughts.

We talk, Mom and I, about Dan, and then, yes, the turtle. Something deep inside her is fulfilled by my having one; it's like I've come full circle back to some core of who I was as a child—the little girl with baby turtles. I think about the silent grief of parenting, witnessing your child stray from what you perceived as their essence, that little person you hold in a locket within your heart. And now, for her, I've returned.

"I promise to email a new Pab picture when I get back to my laptop."

"I'd love that," she says, and she truly means it. "And I'll send the food list."

After our "Goodbyes," I step outside to scoop up the thrush, swaddling it in paper towels to bring home to draw.

Dead Thrush,
leaving me
to spread its wings.
- Seishi



Day seven. In bounces a chipper physical therapist in lilac scrubs with butterfly tattoos fluttering up her arm, under her sleeve, and out her shirt's V-neck. She says today I should learn how to help Dan get out of bed and sit in a chair. I drag the walker over as she puts a gait belt—a wide, strong strap—around his waist. She coaches him to slowly move his legs over the side of the bed, stand up, and then grasp the walker. He's so sallow and skinny now, so weak and stooped—I catch my breath as he wobbles and cautiously steps forward.

In 1952, Dan's Aunt Lucy wrote, "Danny took his first steps," to his mother bedridden in a TB sanatorium outside of London. This is one line in a recently discovered letter from Dan's family's early days in England. Taking first steps then . . .

And now he steps slowly, with help, one . . . foot . . . after . . . the other. He clenches his teeth, lips apart, in his peculiar grin when masking how much something hurts, and then he wilts on the bed, exhausted. Yet he will gain strength in days to come. As he does, the house will be ready for him to go home. But am I ready? Am I ready to be a nurse, companion, physical therapist, and dietitian on call 24/7?

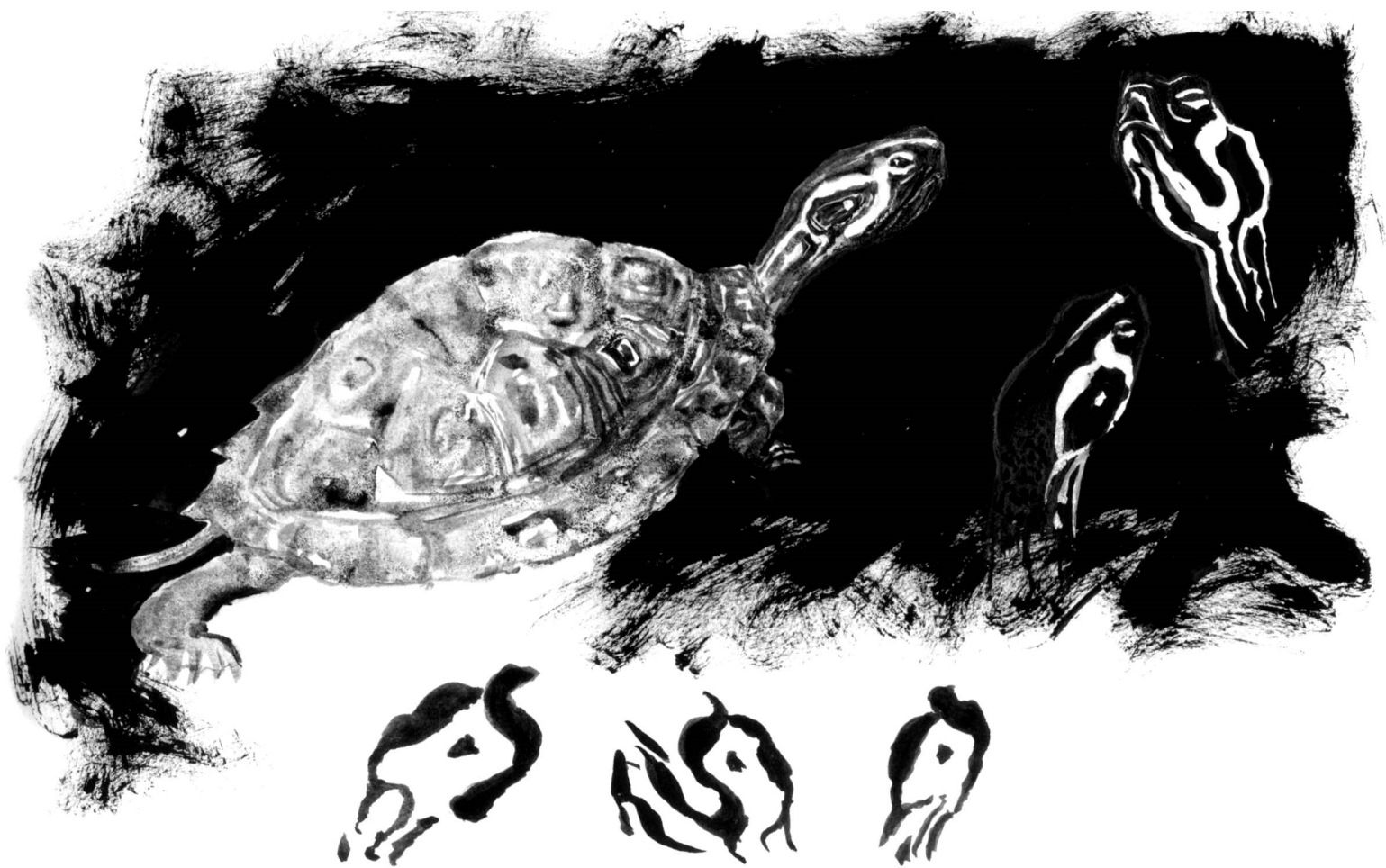
I'll take my cue from Pab, who's adapted to her tank's new place. Her eating, basking, and sleeping routine is back to normal. Again she takes her favorite sleep position: right front foot stretched out, left back foot extended. She calms me. I'll take it one step at a time.



Day eleven. Dan's release day. "Release"—funny word for leaving the hospital, no? A young volunteer arrives in a crisp white shirt and wet-combed hair, a simple silver cross dangling beneath his protruding Adam's apple. He smiles shyly while gently easing Dan into a wheelchair, pushing him to the elevator, and then down to the double exit doors where my Outback waits. "Sir, I'm gonna help you on this here riser seat now."

Home.

I slowly help Dan out of the car and guide him to our front door, where, once inside, I place his hands on a walker. He clutches hard. Stooped and bandy-legged, he shuffles forward a few feet and glances left toward the dining room. "Oh, she's up here!" His eyes water as he scoots over to Pab's tank. Frail shoulders curve as he peers down. "Look at those beautiful designs on her head, like a map." Only then does he navigate to the bedroom.



Days pass. Dan's propped up in bed, slowly spooning yogurt into his mouth as if it's a precarious journey from bowl to lips. Now, the moment of truth: he asks for coffee, so I brew some, holding my breath as he sips, sips some more. Without that little gall bladder, will he "stomach" the coffee? I watch, wait. Later, I see the empty mug on the coaster as he clutches a book. "Was that French Roast?" he asks without looking up.

Now I sit in the bedside chair. We talk about the day Pab first arrived. I'd been working on a series of turtle paintings—what could be better than watching a live turtle?—so I "ordered" one. I flip open my sketchbook to find my first sketch of her when she had a maze of lines on each scute. Besides the drawing, I wrote, "Some minute string of DNA drew these inventive squiggles."

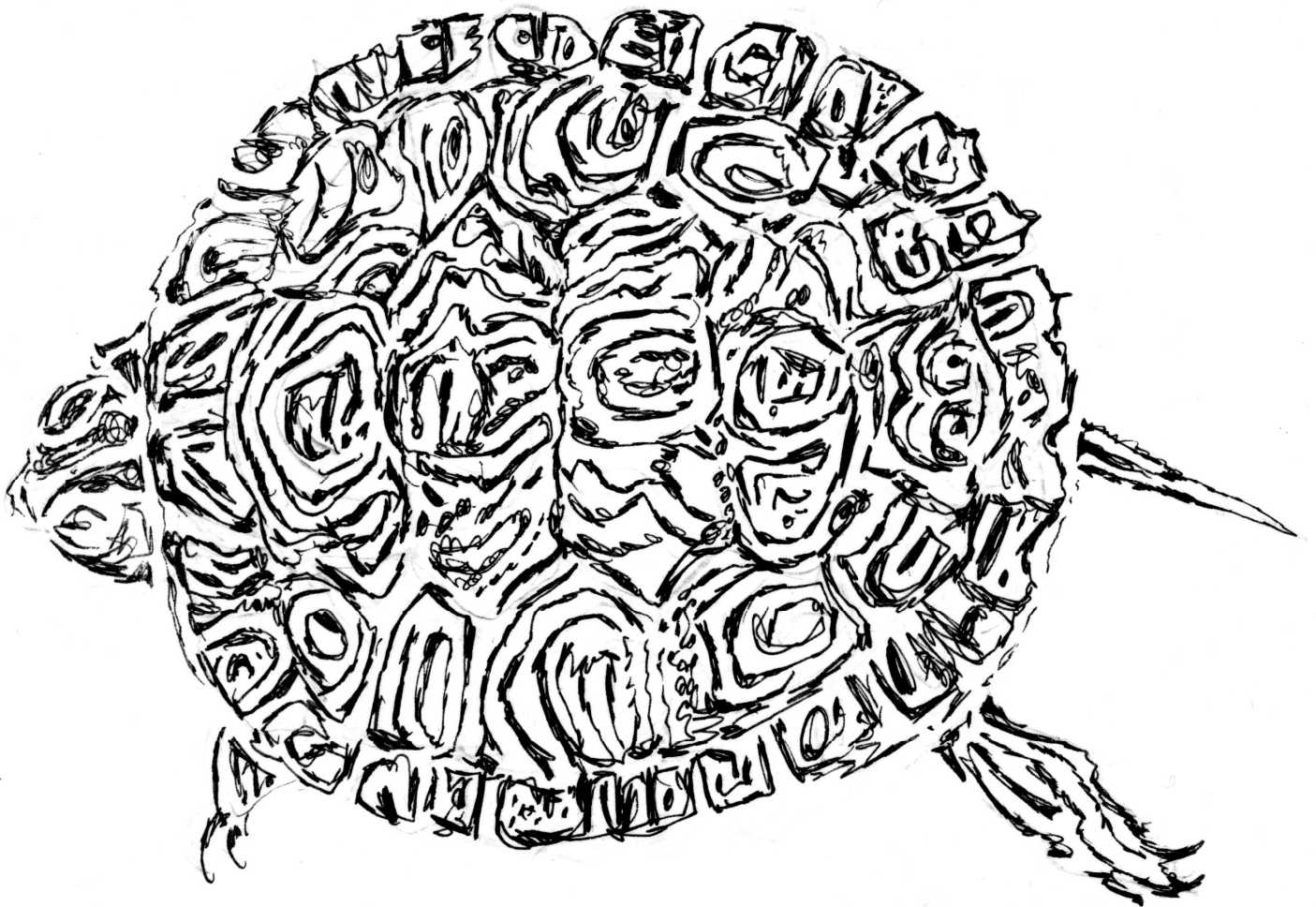
She's lost all those topographical lines on her carapace now. We reminisce about the "stork" that brought her—the FedEx delivery man—who left a box marked

LIVE ANIMALS – RUSH

on the doorstep. We remember how we worried when she wouldn't eat for weeks.

In the following days, I help Dan wash, eat, get to the commode, prepare his mashed food, change his sheets, arrange his meds on a tray with a pitcher of water and glass, and make a chart of all his doctor's appointments in green marker on a dry-erase board. But we don't talk much about all this. And we don't talk about the past surgery. Or what's to come.

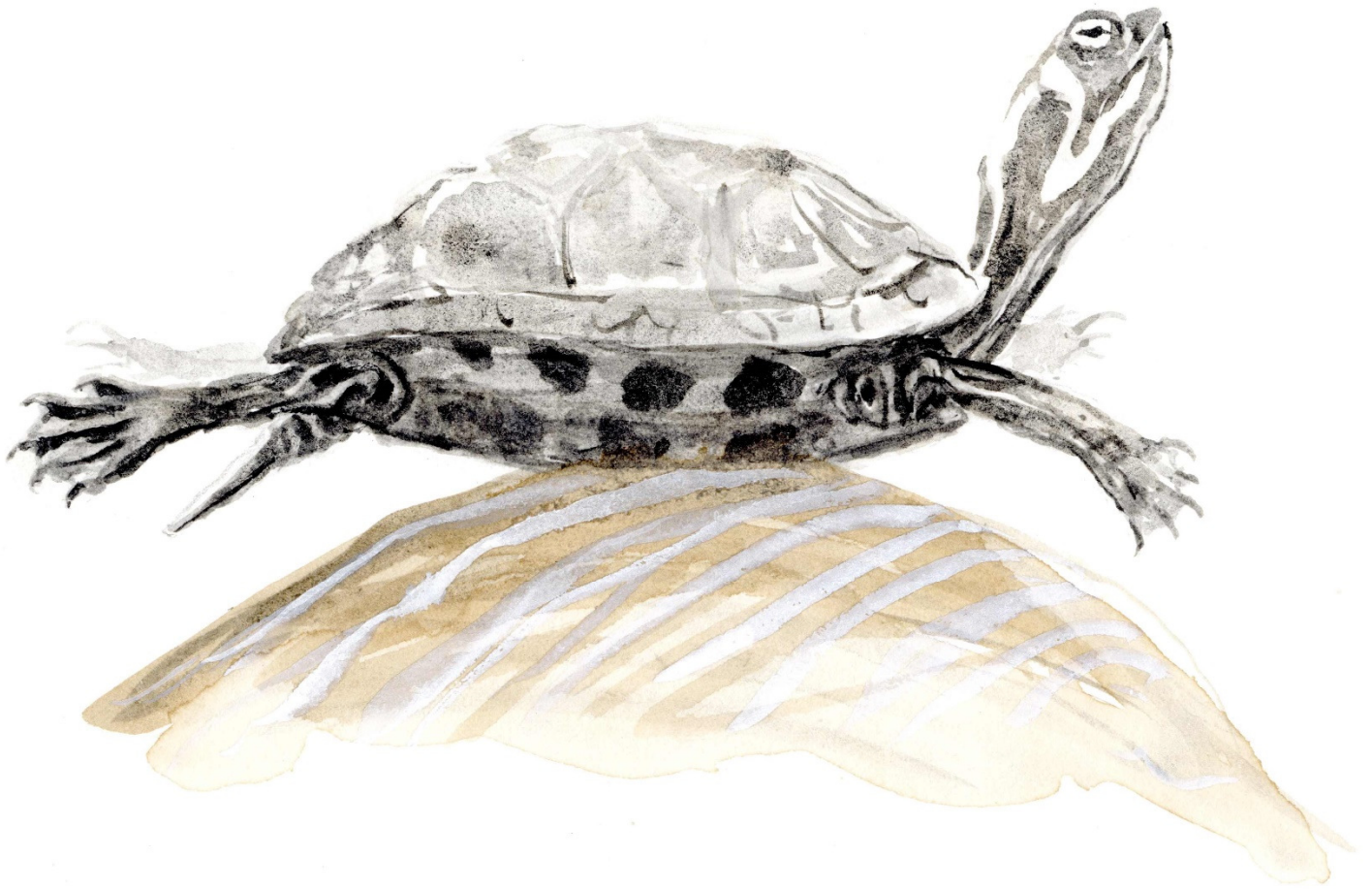
We talk about the turtle.



“Remember when she was the size of a silver dollar, and she’d bask on a little shell?” Dan asks.

I nod. “Yeah, we called it her ‘Superman pose.’ I searched through my sketchbook, “Here it is. Documented for eternity!” I held up a drawing of her on the shell, her feet and head stretched out as if flying.

We also thought she was a “he.” Dan named her ‘Pablo.’ Later, we learned how to sex a slider turtle, so we shortened it to “Pab.” The females’ tails and nails are shorter, while males have long tails and long foxy nails to tickle female’s shell and cheeks—really! Isn’t that a delightful way of wooing?



“Remember when she first started eating?” I ask.

“Do I ever,” Dan says. “She never wanted to stop once she discovered the joy of gobbling!”

These days, she eats:

Nutri Stick for turtles

BugBites

Raisons

Romaine lettuce (no other type of lettuce accepted)

Insects & worms from the autumn garden

Food lists. Always food lists.



It's early October. Dan no longer depends on the walker. As he shuffles toward the kitchen this afternoon, the phone rings. I see "Mom" on the caller ID screen.

"That's funny, my mother never calls in the afternoon."

"Hello?"

"She's gone," my sister Cheryl chokes up. She's phoning from my mother's home in Illinois to tell me Mom has died, that she found her on the floor this morning holding a paintbrush and a small jar of yellow paint. "She must have been touching something up." Then she tells me the police said she died the night before and that her glass of wine and untouched dinner were on the kitchen counter.

Placing the phone back on the holster, I whisper to Dan as if in disbelief, "My mother died." And now he's holding me as I sob. He strokes my head. "How can all this happen at once?" I ask. Because it does. Because it does. Because it did.

Dan is saying something about her love of crafting and fixing things, about her attention to detail. His voice is disembodied as if I were hearing it underwater. Then when he says, "I remember how she made feet for your genome birds," my mind springs to the scene: her wrapping wire for the claws of my sculpted paper birds, strong and well-placed feet that held them up on those spindly legs. "Three toes forward, one back," I'd told her. I called these my Humpty Dumpty birds because they're constructed with strings of real bird genomes as if putting the bird back together again.

The feet I made are a tangle of wire. But hers coil evenly, beautifully, like delicate little vines.



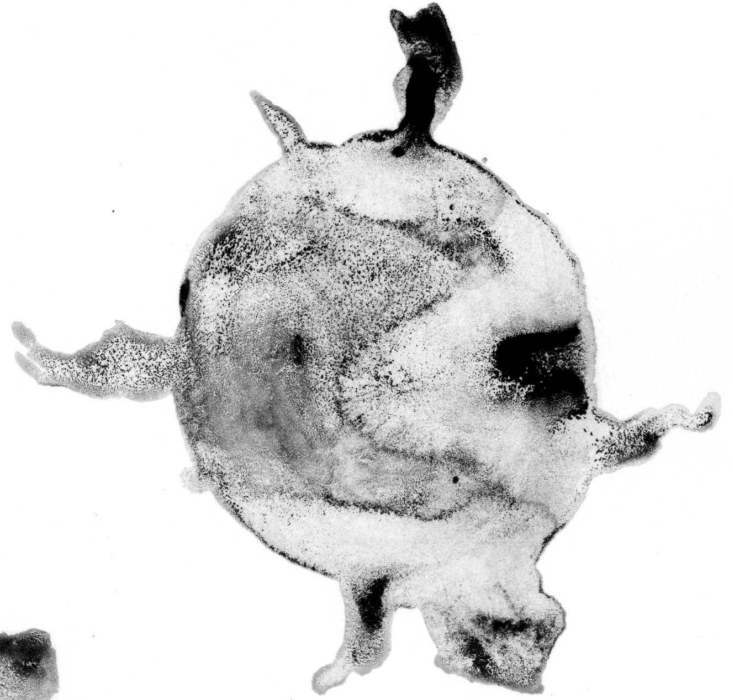
A birthday card arrives two days later – even during her last days my mother didn't forget a birthday. She wrote under a picture of us in my studio working on those wire claws: "Happy Birthday! From the elder of the team of bird feet artists!"

I unpack one of "our" birds. Now the strings of genome printouts wrapping the form hit me with a fresh thought: How did my mother's creativity pass down to me? Although she didn't engage in "fine art" herself, she expressed her artistic nature by sewing patchwork hostess skirts and burlap curtains with fringed edges, refinishing unique old carved picture frames, and, yes, by making homemade greeting cards. When I was 13, she'd shuttle me across town to a funky school for local painters, vicariously enjoying her daughter's creative doings. Months before Christmas, our ping-pong table was strewn with sequins & pins, styrofoam balls, and ribbons for making ornaments. I've often thought of her influence, but could there be an art impulse wound in the coils of our DNA?



Days pass. Every Sunday morning, I glance at the clock and then at the phone.

Dan and I watch the turtle bask or paddle around her tank, aware that chemotherapy lies ahead.



Late October. We return to the hospital for a port to be inserted in Dan's upper chest. It's like a small door into his vein where, twice a month, toxic chemicals will be injected into his system, killing all the growing cells in his body—cancerous and not.

I drop Dan off at the surgery unit. "Moon River" drifts through the lobby, so I expect to see Charlie at the keyboard. But no. Now a small altar's arranged on the piano's black quilted cover: a framed picture of "Our Late Piano Man" tilts near a boombox playing his recorded songs and a memory book bursting with praise for the man who brought music to these halls.

Now I sit in the hospital chapel, alone, remembering my first sight this morning: Pab basking in the sunlight streaming through the window. Up on her stone, her neck fully outstretched, one foot dangling in the water. She seemed blissful, so wedded to her sun-on-shell moment.

A small spider hangs upside down in a web woven under the pulpit. What does the little creature find to eat in this hygienic habitat? Then I remember the haiku: "Where there are Buddhas, there are flies," and smile.



Late November. Dan will begin cancer treatment soon. We sit in the oncologist's office to get the lowdown. Infusions. The Fulfilla shot which will boost white blood cell growth, those tiny guards against infection. Chemo side effects: nausea, fatigue. But no hair loss with this particular treatment. Dan will need to wear a mask in public. No restaurants. No airports, trains, or crowds for six months.

"No travel?" Dan pauses. I know what he's thinking. He hoped to get to London soon, where his 92-year-old mum lives.

When we return home, I make a painting of the turtle's plastron with its various dots. I think of a roll of the dice, where one lands face-up: six. I also think that this configuration of tummy spots is unique to her, only her.



Early December. First infusion. Dan ambles through the living room with tubes dangling from his port to the pump secured in a waist pack. Behind him, clipped to an easel, his drawing of a mask-like head looks on with a vacant Haniwa expression.

Dan's first love was drawing—a visual artist's soul is etched into his being. He took the writing path in his early twenties but could have gone either way. In the last few years, he's penciled images on drawing paper, contractor paper (those big pinkish rolls from the hardware store), and even oddments of cardboard.



Weeks later, when I peek in on him, I find him reading in bed. Over his head hangs the mask he paper maché'd years ago—he didn't resemble "Weary" when he sculpted it, but he does now.

He gets up and says he's going to make coffee. When he totters back, he cautiously clutches the mug. I offer to help him put it on the side table. "No, I can do it," he insists, but still, he takes a sip before doing so. Once back in bed, he keeps reading and sipping. I notice he's not using a cap with a straw—his solution to spills from shaking—yet I say nothing, trying not to be annoyingly watchful.

Instead, I fetch my sketchbook to capture how light caresses his head, hand, and book pages, reminding me of Rembrandt's painting of his mother reading. Something about the illuminated open book evokes the magic of light—from without, within, and from what is written on those pages. Did Rembrandt teach me how to see it that way?

Today was such a calm day.



But sometimes we break.

Like this morning:

“You have a bucket right here; why couldn't you vomit in *it*?” My voice rasps and gets sharp; I know how mean I sound when it comes out. But my mercury has risen: I snap. The sheets were just changed yesterday. He's hurled onto everything: two blankets, sheets, pillows, the wall. Even the mattress pad smells like puke.

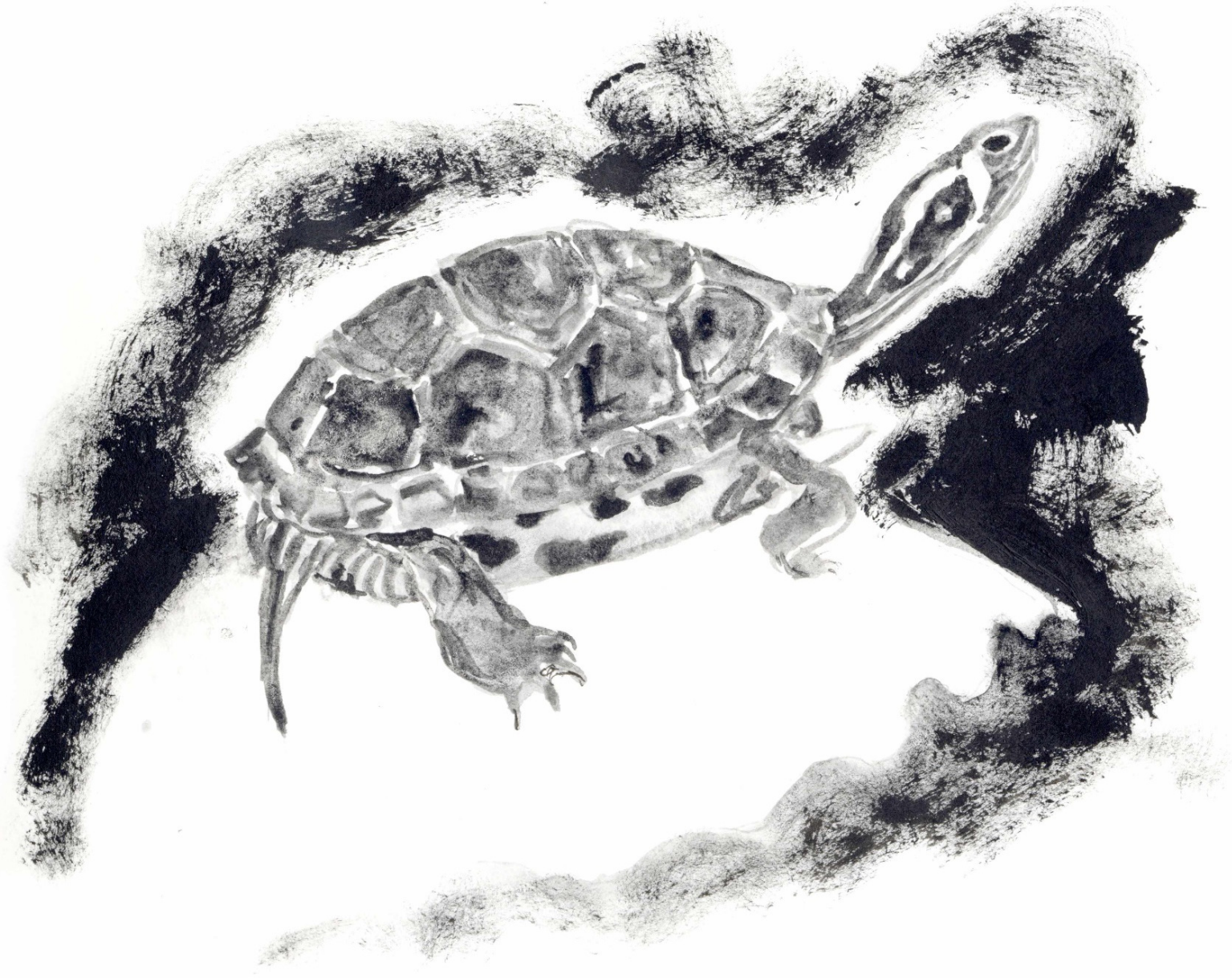
Dan slumps in the chair, head down. “I'm sorry.”

“I'm sorry, too. I didn't mean to get so upset,” and I fetch the laundry basket but still move jerkily. I'd planned on some time for myself today. Dan takes off his PJ shirt and pants, tosses them in, and pulls on another pair. I help him to the couch. It's late morning. I'm exhausted.

The other day, Dan blew a fuse. He scolded me for loading the spatula in the dishwasher near the knives and claimed he cut his hand because of it. I saw no blood. We forgot to feed Pab that morning.



But the next day, we feed Pab—and how! Shrimp, pellets, lettuce, and some wild purple grapes she adores.



Now, it's late January. Dan says he's going to find a worm for Pab. I say it's too cold for worms, but he ventures out anyway. The worms know a thing or two. But Dan loves the mission.



Pab basks, oblivious to her caretaker's worm safari. I prefer "caretaker" to "owner." I don't even like the word "pet." I'm frankly ambivalent about keeping an animal in a tank or cage, yet here we are.



I often think that Dan doesn't honestly know how much I do for him, just as I don't know how much pain and stress he's enduring. That's just the way it is. Sick or not. Even after knowing someone for years, we only glimpse their entire being.

Now, he drives himself to the cancer center. Watching him back out of the driveway, I think about how he's spent more time cradling his split index finger—and moaning about it—than he's ever complained about his cancer treatment. So off he goes, bravely facing another round of poison. All I can see is the light hitting the back of his head and glinting off his glasses as he clutches the steering wheel of his battered little Corolla—hail-pocked but reliable.



Today, the hunter captured one limp pink dinner for his turtle pal.

“Over here, Pab!” The worm falls to her left as she looks up to Dan. When it falls to the bottom of the tank she spots the wiggling snack, submerges, and snaps it up. We speculate about her vision, whether she sees differently above and underwater.

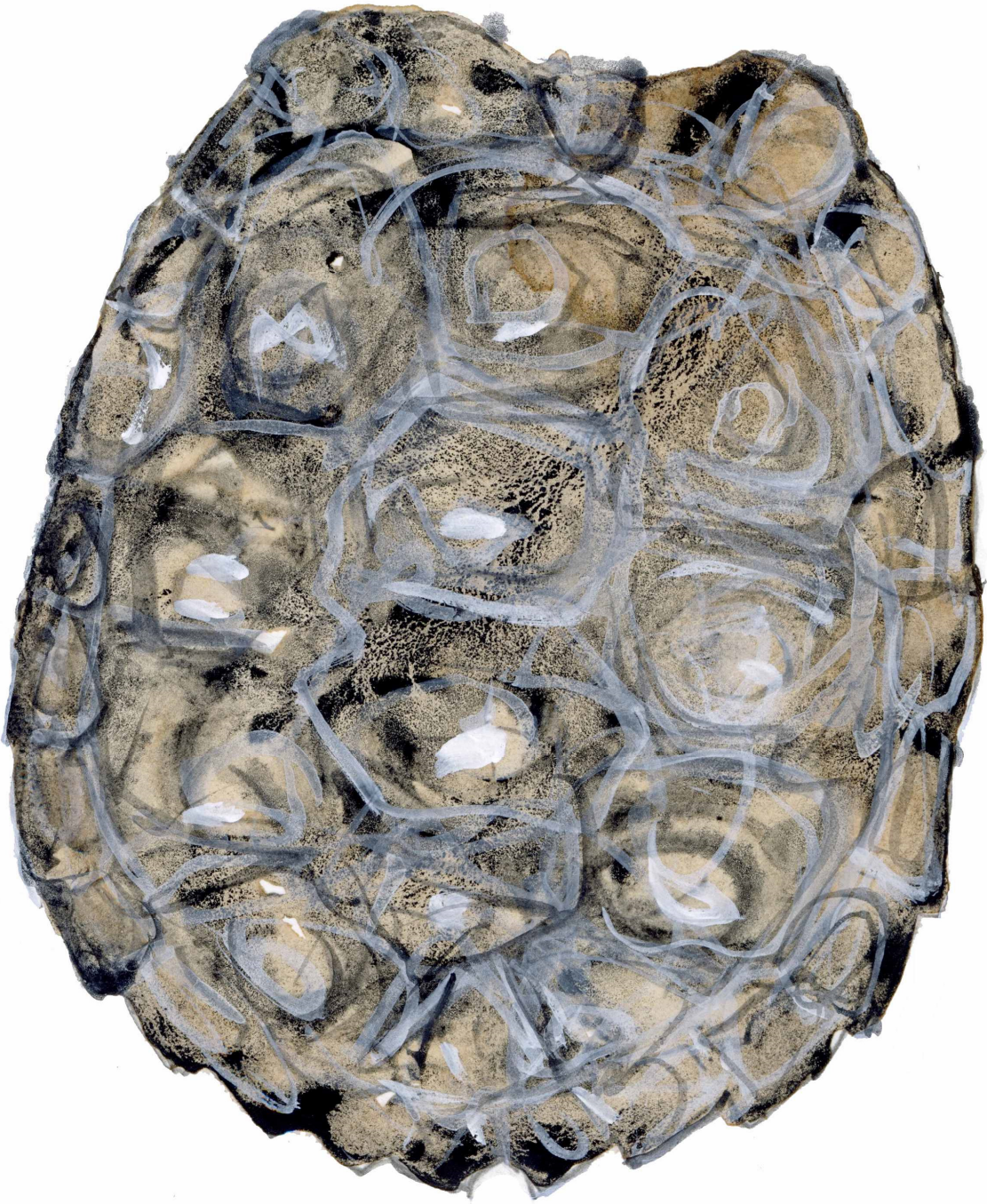
This is the highlight of the day.

I really mean to look up facts about turtle eyesight, but I forget. Or maybe, truth be told, I don't forget. Maybe there's something to be said about speculating, about imagining what it's like to see as a turtle simply by watching her. Maybe my whole life is finding the right balance between the looking up and the looking out.



I've come to understand Dan as an urban boy with a nature brain. What a feeling he has for creatures—turtles, snakes, possums, you name it. I was going to say “even the unlovely ones,” but honestly, he is most drawn to those. And not just that. He points out leaf miner hieroglyphics written on wild grape leaves. Or swirling designs in the pond scum at the local wetland. During his childhood, he lived all over the world including the urbane atmosphere of London, where he was born. You'd expect him to like roses, but who would have thought he could be so at ease with nature's scales and scutes and slime?

When he lived in Iran, where his father was a professor at the University of Tehran, “Danny” was given a wild tortoise by an American who worked construction in the desert. These animals burrow deep in the sand to avoid midday swelter. And so I wasn't surprised to hear the story sadly ends with Danny's best Iranian friend, “Buddy,” excavating a hole under the walled garden to escape.



There is a town in North Ontario . . . “ Neil Young's high-pitched croon sent Pab into a turtle tizzy when she was only a few months old. She'd stretch her neck out of the water to listen, flap madly around the tank, listen, flap more, listen more. Turns out Pab loves music.

Now we play CDs for her every day. Slider turtles don't have external ears but feel sound vibrations internally. So after some rather unscience-y experiments, we discovered that Pab prefers a distinctive beat, a high pitch, or both. Neil's voice + his percussive guitar = a perfect match!

Today, she's enjoying Bill Monroe during her “walk-around time.” That's when she gets out of the tank to roam the dining room, where I've created a turtle playground on astroturf. There's a cardboard box with two wide doors for a “house,” a paper tunnel, and a basking light over a slab of bark so she can keep her body temp up. And I place a boom box down at her level. When she approaches the speakers, she lifts her head as Monroe's strumming mandolin rhythms the air, pausing as if processing angelic vibrations. What is it she's feeling?

After listening awhile, she trundles over to her bark to bask.



Today I drive Dan to the cancer center because he's dizzy and woozy.

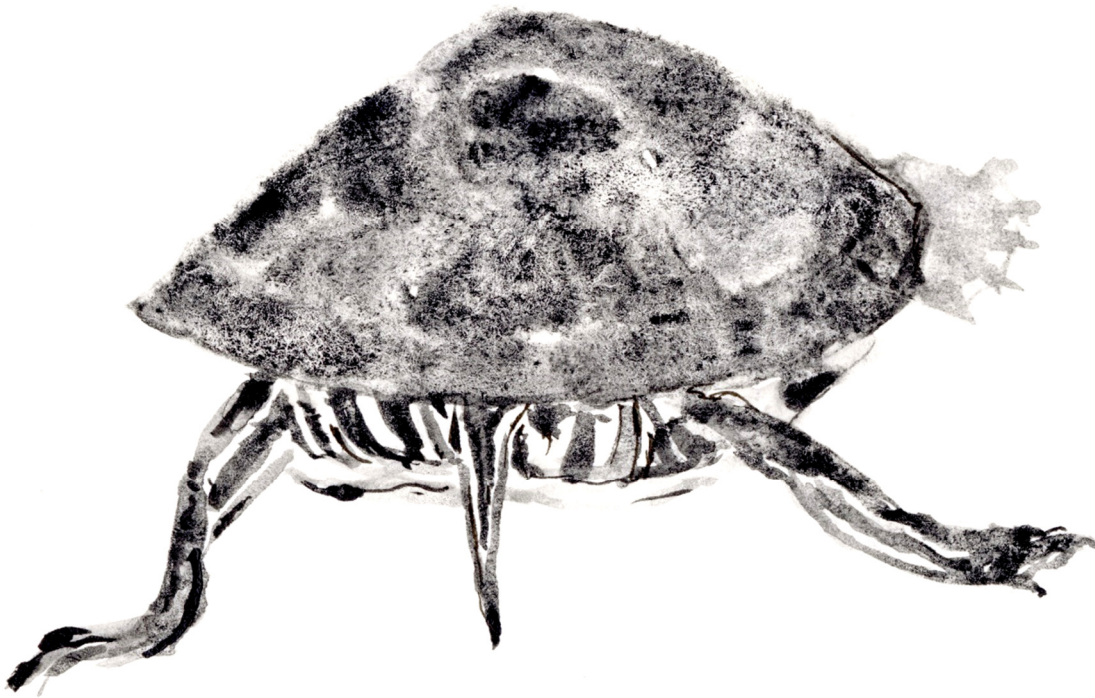
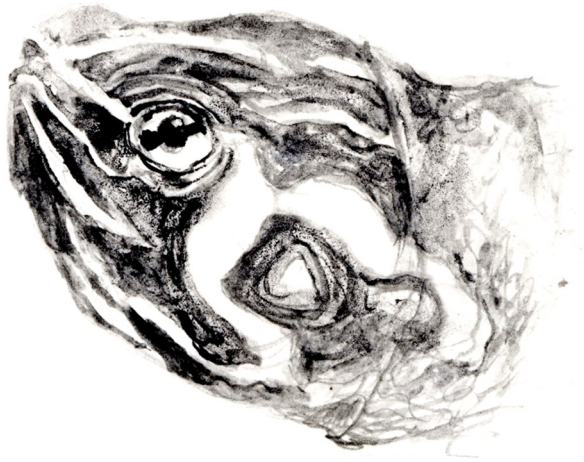
In the waiting room, most people sit in twos—patient and carer—and I sketch what may be a mother and daughter. The older one, bald from radiation, clutches a photo. I consider sidling behind them to peek at the picture, maybe even hear a snippet of the story. No, better not. The younger one looks sleepy as if she's heard this story a million times, or perhaps she's had a troubling night. I shield my sketchbook from sight with my knees so they don't see me drawing them.



Every morning, Pab basks on her raft. Sometimes I swear she eyes me with a slightly suspicious expression. I know that's not it, but it's not really cute either.

Still, we banter about her cuteness, diffusing our own suspicions about the future. We joke, "Priscilla Paddlefoot likes to show off her lovely big feet." We admire her "fancy paints" and "head blings"—all those Art Nouveau stripes, yellow on blackish-green. And the turtle is none the worse for our jests—thus far, she hasn't lost any self-esteem. We call her "Basko da Gama" as she suns herself, or "Tilly Rimenschnieder" for whatever reason, I guess just being plain silly.

And yet—despite our playful names—we respect her turtleness, her genius for being the shelled miracle she is.

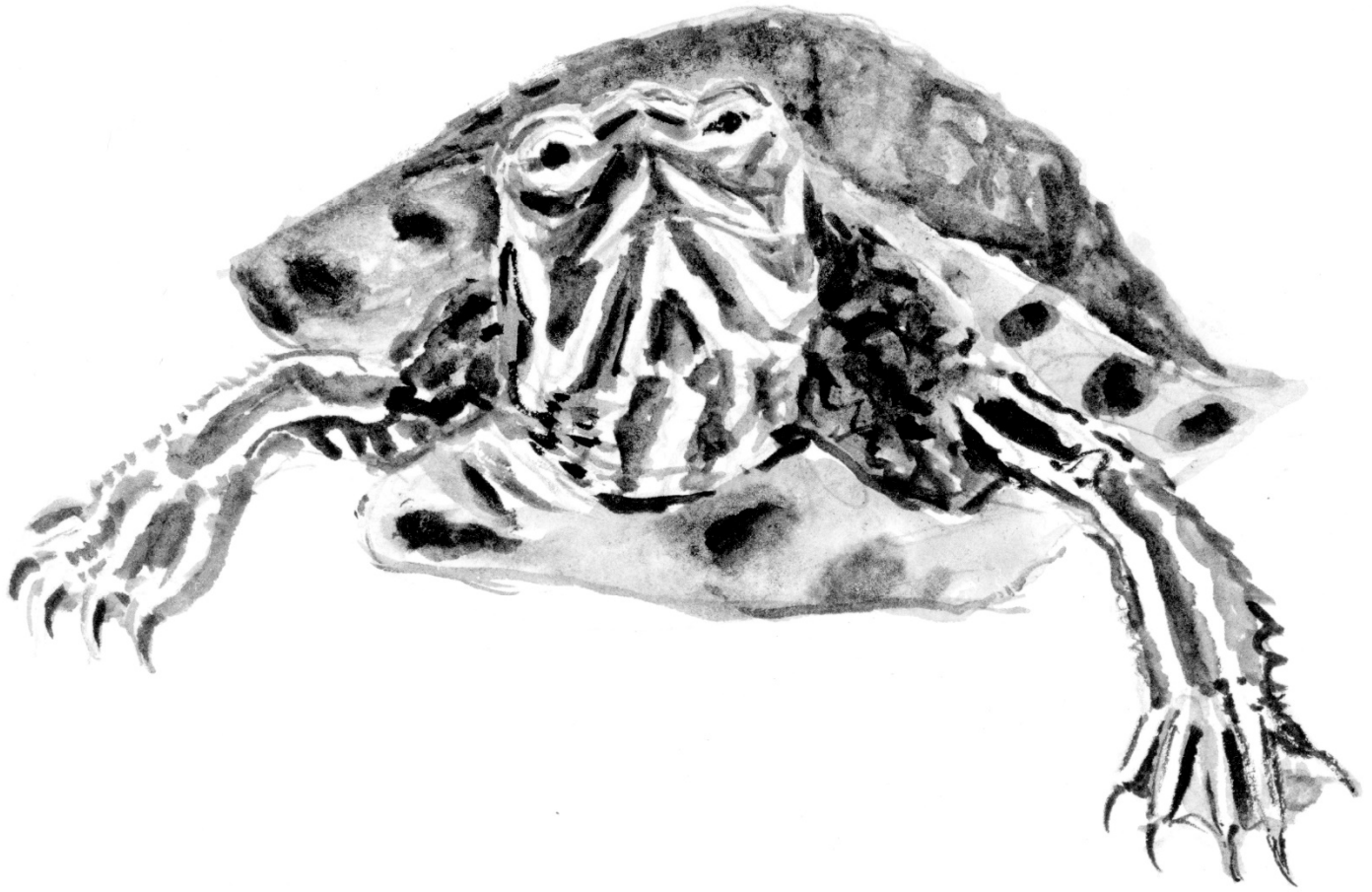


Some days, the turtle's face conjures me to a time when my hands were small, my mind open.

In the late '50s, my friend Cindy and I would walk uptown to Kresge's five-and-dime with coins jingling in our little purses, meander down aisles to the pet section, and each select a baby turtle. A lady in a pink smock would struggle to nab the one we pointed to in the pile of little reptiles, which she'd then place in a paper box with a metal handle like a Chinese restaurant carryout container.

Poor little creatures. We didn't know how to care for them. I'm embarrassed to confess that we fed them only dry flakes of boxed turtle food and raw hamburger. Plastic bowls with a center island sprouting one kelly-green plastic palm tree served as a pitiful habitat for the hatchlings. Their shells got soft—we didn't know their need for UVB rays. They'd die or sometimes escape when we played with them outside. We didn't know *how* to love them, but we did love them.

As I said, some days when I watch Pab, I feel like I'm looking through my eyes as a child. I'm doing a better job of loving her.



Late Winter.

We're well into our third month of chemo. I say "our" third month because, you know, it affects us both.

Dan came home today feeling nauseous after the infusion. I hear the "Pssst" of his pump. He says he needs a nap but visits Pab first. Then he toddles to the freezer, defrosts a shrimp, cuts it up, and feeds her three good-sized chunks.

Only then does he nap.



Who knows what makes a marriage last? Who knows why Dan and I, who have many differences, wounds, and failings, stay together while others with less strife do not. But I think our mutual care of Pab has given me a clue. We look “outward together in the same direction.” Art, books, nature . . . now, a turtle.

Today as he bathed, I sketched Dan’s scar—a grayish-pink dashed line running from under his rib cage down the soft curve of his pale belly. I no longer feel anxious about not getting to larger art projects. Rather, I “use the difficulty,” as Michael Caine once said was his secret to acting and life.



Speaking of difficulty . . .

On my painting table sits an old coffee mug holding a spray of paintbrushes. But it was once Dan's prized pottery cup—he even christened it “Dark Sands” for its grainy glaze and its mood—an aesthetic match made in heaven. But more, the handle was a perfect fit for his fingers and thumb. Once, when the handle broke in two places, he epoxied each piece, squeezing the joints back in place with gentle pressure to ensure a strong bond. It held Dan's brew for years after, until...*Crash!* “Oh, NO!” Dark Sands' handle lay shattered on the kitchen floor. He somberly swept chunks of pottery and all the tiny chips into a dustpan, but before they slid into the trash, I stopped him: “No, wait! I'll do a Kintsugi repair! You'll love it!”

This proves either my foolishness or my arrogance or both. The Japanese art of Kintsugi—mending a broken ceramic by filling cracks with gold—requires years to master. In other words, creating those stunning lightning-bright fissures is not for the novice, as I soon learned.

And oh boy, did I do a number on Dark Sands with E6000 glue and gold acrylic. It's so bad it's funny. No, really. Globes of gold? Dan couldn't use it—the handle wasn't strong, and now the mug looked stupid. This leads me to the philosophical insight that no matter how much time and loving care and artistry we devote to fixing the broken, we may still fuck things up worse.



Time passes. Days blur.



Not much writing or drawing for Dan these days. He spends most of his time reading. Occasionally, he'll open his 3-ring notebook and fiddle with a word or two in a poem. I haven't seen him open his laptop, and he hasn't picked up a pencil to draw, either.

Walking between his mask-like drawn heads and my heron painting, he pauses, gazing into space. To the picture window? Maybe. Maybe not. His chemo pump hisses.



I often sit in front of a painting in progress without painting, as I am now. Where did I leave off, and how do I re-enter the process? But this sitting and staring leads somewhere, too. This morning, I squirted acrylics on a palette, picked up some brushes, and dribbled blue-green paint on a large turtle painting. Between the spaces of a fern glued to the panel, I filled in opaque black, creating odd jagged shapes that, when I stand back, "read" as a turtle silhouette.

Sometimes, I think art attempts to make the transient permanent, but today I think it's simply a nice way to spend the day.



Flap-flap-flap: turtle feet paddle vigorously behind the glass. She pierces the water's surface with her nose, then plunges to poke around in tank-bottom stones as if she had better things to do than look up at me. And I think: Pab loves her life as we love ours. Or maybe, closer to the truth, she wants to live as we want to live. Sometimes we love life, and sometimes we don't. Yet, hopefully, either way, we still want to experience life's ride.

The yellow-bellied slider's lifespan is 30-40 years. Since I'm sixty-eight and she's almost two, it's safe to say she may outlive me. I guess I'll have to leave instructions for her welfare in my will.

And with that thought, I turn from the aquarium back to my small spiral notebook listing foods for Dan today:

sweet potato

broiled fish

chopped spinach

yogurt

cantaloupe

Always, always, lists of food.



Early Spring.

Dan's spoiling Pab. He feeds her too often and too much—fish, worms, and roly-polys, as if she needs three meals daily—and snacks!

He lights up as she snaps a morsel he's just dropped into the water. Who could be hard-nosed about anything when this is the main delight he's snapping from life these days? Pab makes worm into turtle in seconds flat, then looks up for more . . .

And yet, I'm "spoiling" Dan, too, by letting him feed her in the tank. I'll have to do water changes more often—feeding her in a separate tub is the way to go. But who cares about what I *should* do *now*? I know we all eventually pay for our indulgences. Still, today, I don't care. I'm just not going to worry about it.



As the chemo pump sputters and hums from the pack around his waist, tubes drag on the drawing table. Yet, what joy—yes, I'm going to say that, what joy— to see Dan transfixed by the magic of his pencil on paper. He's even unaware I'm drawing him.

From his boombox, the Red Hot Chili Peppers sing, "Music is my aeroplane." Drawing is Dan's.



The pencil line faded from the coffee he poured over the entire page, and the paper is gouged to a pulp by his trying to get the neck and shell shape right. But despite this, or maybe because of this, Dan's drawing captures something about Pab's mysterious inner turtle.

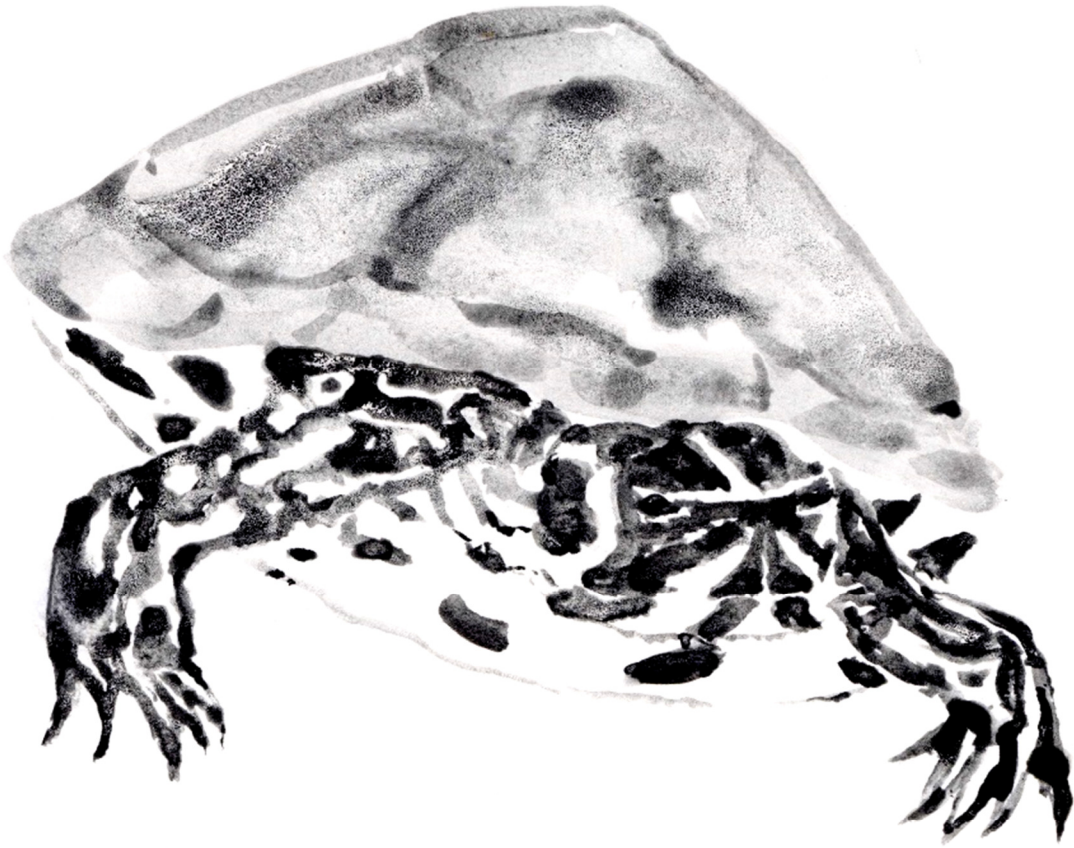


She is a little wilderness package between carapace & plastron. Her eyes meet ours, but the gears behind them might as well live in a lily-pad-choked pond.

This yellow-bellied slider would have been at home had she hatched in a dirt bank of a Southeastern Virginia waterhole where, while natural, her life would have been less certain. Imagine—she might have been dinner to ravenous snapping turtles or raccoons on the prowl. Imagine her not getting deep enough in pond muck before a winter freeze. Some days she wouldn't find enough to eat. And what about crossing a road when it's egg-laying time? But might she not be happier in the wild? Or maybe "happy" isn't the point. The point is that every cell of her body would be suited to a place, like a puzzle piece that fits.

Wildness feels uncertain to us. How many ways do we deny it—our cell phones, our prayers, our busyness? Add distractions to that list, from Sudoku to YouTube.

And now, for Dan, for me, turtleness distracts us from the void of our uncertainty.



Today, a sight I thought I might never see again: Dan staring into his laptop's word world, a cup of brew beside him. At this moment, he's not defined by surgery, cancer, treatments, or doctors. Now, he's the writer, the fiddler with words, the image maker.

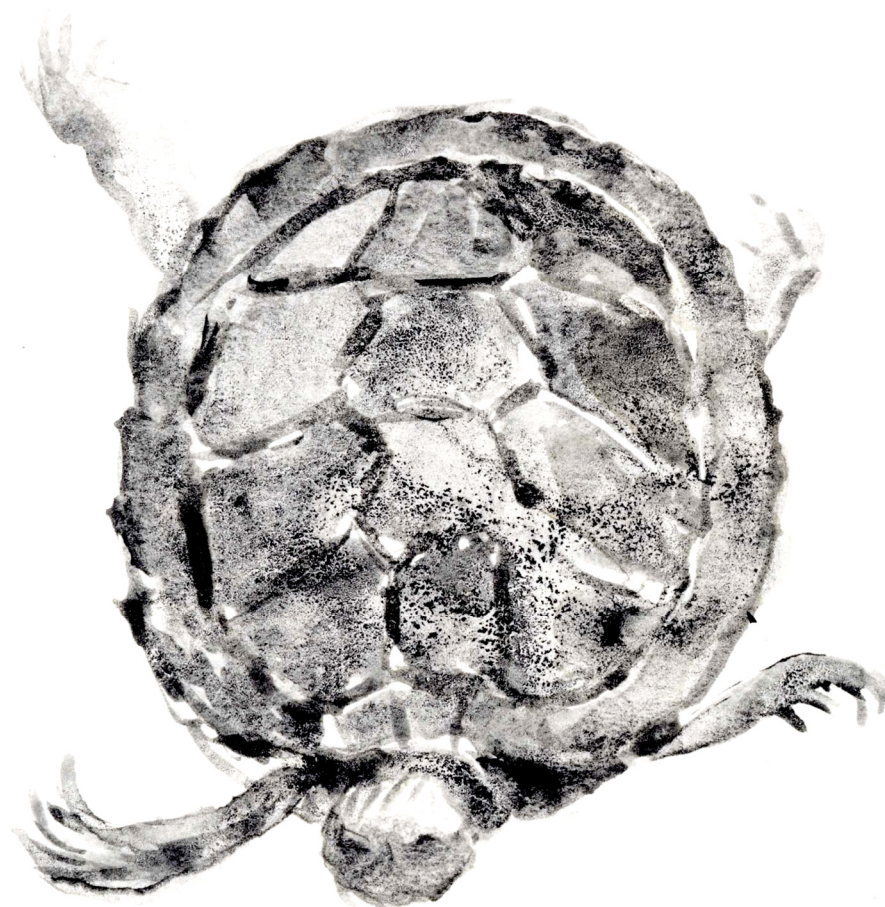
The poem on his screen could be the one about seeking the perfect coffee cup but never finding “. . . the one that I would / live with, where texture, shape & glaze / resembled rock or aging bone—a granite- / pure extension of the arm. Or, more, / a focus for the eyes: dawn's faint beacon / through the early haze, turned runic dolmen / settled on the desk's grained edge by / noon . . .”

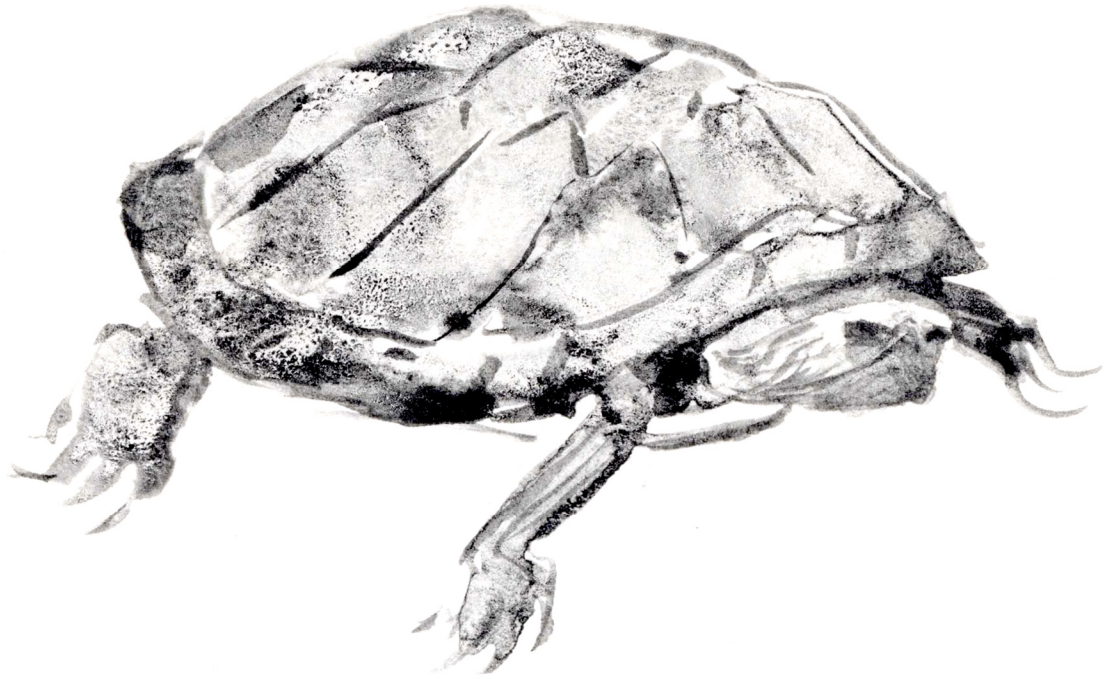
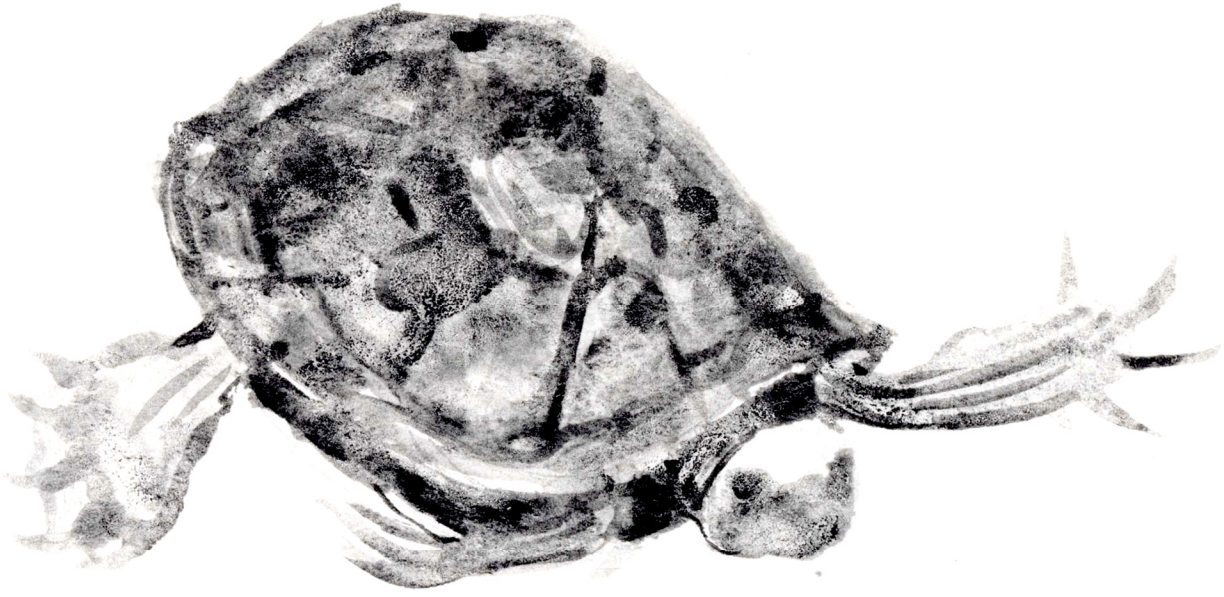
He writes about a past time when he was questing for a beautiful coffee cup, glaze mottled like rock strata with a handle to suit his clutch. He imagines walking “with it to work each day—mind's / fossil-truth, like permanence beneath green / leaves — & hiding it in my desk.” Why “hide”? Because when something is precious, it's vulnerable to loss or chips? And of course, we know the fate of “Dark Sands.”

Now, with a jumble of medical conditions, he's resigned to an insulated cup with a tight-fitting lid. He puckers his mouth around a blue silicone straw. Coffee. Any way he can suck it up.



We measure days with coffee spoons, turtle antics, and medications. Before bedtime, I swipe the date from the fridge calendar with the spongy end of a dry-erase pen.





Many know Dan as the poet who loves magnolia leaves—that's how I characterized him in *The Middle of Somewhere*, quoting his magnolia artist lyric. Today, he holds one to his face like a mask and peeks through a hole. His silliness makes me happy.

Poet Donald Hall wrote about himself and his wife, Jane Kenyon: "We did not spend our days gazing into each other's eyes . . . most of the time our gazes met and entwined as they looked at a third thing. Third things are essential to marriages, objects or practices or habits or arts or institutions or games or human beings that provide a site of joint rapture or contentment. Each member of a couple is separate: the two come together in double attention. Lovemaking is not a third thing but two-in-one. John Keats can be a third thing, or the Boston Symphony Orchestra, or Dutch Interiors, or Monopoly."

Or a turtle.



Crickets, small wood roaches, and beetles hop or crawl into the turtle menu in late spring. Dan challenges me: Could you draw Pab eating a beetle?

I'll give it a try.

It's not easy because slider turtles gulp their food quickly. They lack teeth, so they don't chew. They lack saliva, so they must be in the water when eating. But they don't lack gusto, devouring food as if it might get away or some other pond creature lurking nearby will nab it. Pab has no rivalry, but tell that to her DNA. All this is to say I sketch swiftly with pencil and later add black watercolor. Coffee wash for the brown beetle.

I try to capture the twist of her foot and the dull focus of her eye. Dan strolls into the studio, "You nailed it!"



Early summer. Cancer treatment behind us now.

I'm out weeding the Romaine lettuce patch as Pab trundles around the raised bed garden. With her nose and sharp little claws, she digs under loose compost mounded around spindly pepper plants. The sun feels warm on my skin; I wonder how it feels to her, cold-blooded as she is. A sweet soil smell wafts up as I plunge a hand hoe into a whorl of tough crabgrass and pull.

Dan strolls outside to join us, setting his coffee on the concrete garden bench. No sooner does he ask "Where's Pab?" than he sees a green and yellow striped turtle butt sticking out of the earth. When he pulls her out she's caked with dirt, so I douse her with water from the watering can. And now, her plastron glows like a minor sun.



END

Afterword

Purchasing hatchling turtles isn't allowed in most states. Pab is from a hobbyist turtle breeder, but even so, I had to say the animal was for "educational purposes" (maybe art isn't your typical mode of education, but in my mind, it is).

Turtles require a lot more care than you'd think. The cute little hatchlings may grow bigger than a dinner plate. Yellow-bellied sliders are doing quite well in the wild, but I'm alarmed by what's happening to other turtle species.

If you're considering getting a turtle, many unreleasable rescue turtles are in need of homes. If you decide to buy one, make sure never to purchase exotic species or those taken from the wild. The black market for wildlife is currently threatening turtle populations worldwide. For a fascinating yet sobering look at the state of turtle life, I recommend Sy Montgomery's book, *Of Time and Turtles: Mending the World Shell by Shattered Shell*.