

book reviews



America America

Ethan Canin

480 pages. Random House.

Even the title is invigorating, a splash of nostalgia and hope. Ethan Canin's *America America* (Random House) returns us to the Nixonian 1970s, when reformers dreamed of changing the political climate even as their actions polluted it. Narrated by a sadder and wiser Corey Sifter, once a working-class boy recruited in the "primal battle" of electoral politics by his wealthy mentor, this novel has at its center a charismatic presidential candidate and an unspeakable crime. Politicians—and weary voters: Take this to the beach.

What Was Lost

Catherine O'Flynn

256 pages. Holt.

The bravest and most appealing adolescent this side of *The Lovely Bones*, aspiring detective Kate Meaney vanishes partway through Catherine O'Flynn's mesmerizing debut novel, *What Was Lost* (Holt). Yet Kate's spirit remains, years after her disappearance, at the mall where she once tracked suspicious characters. Like Lisa and Kurt, two disaffected workers who can't get Kate out of their minds, you can't help looking for her in every lonely corridor. There are many ways to feel invisible, we learn from this gentle, sharp-sighted tale of love and loneliness. And there are many ways to be found.

Mind's Eye

Hakan Nesser

288 pages. Pantheon.

Snappish, sardonic, unsentimental, depressed, and quite possibly psychic, Chief Inspector Van Veeteren is the most appealingly unlovable hero since TV's crabby physician House. What Makes *Mind's Eye* (Pantheon), by Swedish crime writer Hakan Nesser, such a surprising read is less the cleverness of the plot (a beautiful woman found dead in her bathtub, a husband devoid of memory of the event) than the way Nesser, a deft anatomist of character, exposes the self-inflicted wounds of the heart.



The



Leaves Had Fallen, *Where Was Spring?*

BY JUDY SMITH

The cancer diagnosis had sent my life into a downward spiral. My already unraveling relationship quickly unwound. My job suffered because I was spending my time on the Internet searching for a cure. When I wasn't tracking down every possible remedy, I was weeping.

"Mama's sad again," my 5-year-old daughter would say with a sigh.

But mostly I was determined. Always having been healthy, I decided first to try alternative methods. I had a vague feeling my illness was a metaphor, that there was a purpose for it, but I didn't know quite what.

Michael, a former boyfriend, understood. We met at 13 and became lovers in our 30's. Now, in our 40's, we lived 300 miles apart and hadn't been in touch for years, but I heard through the grapevine that he had leukemia, so we started e-mailing.

I was doing all these crazy alternatives from macrobotics to qigong and acupuncture. He was juicing like mad, eating for his blood type, and on Gleevec. After attending a cancer survivors' event, he wrote: "It seems a lot of people believe their cancer was the best thing that ever happened. I still have not gotten to that point."

To cheer him up, I wrote, "Here I am, my philandering boyfriend has fallen

madly in love with someone else, I'm on the verge of getting fired, and I have cancer. I feel so pathetic it's comical."

Six months later, my alternative therapies were making me feel great, but they hadn't done a thing to counteract the cancer. I'd finally found a doctor who was sympathetic to patients who wanted to try alternatives, but his message to me was blunt: "If you continue this path, you will die."

I absorbed his words and resigned myself to surgery, but this doctor also had another idea: neoadjuvant chemotherapy. It's doing chemo before surgery with the hope of shrinking the tumor, thereby making the surgery less complicated and also destroying any cancer cells that might be roaming the rest of my body.

"Bring on the big guns," I said.

Since the big guns usually cause nausea, the staff at the clinic gave me plenty of Zofran. As it turned out, I didn't need it — the only side effect of my chemo cocktail was the typical hair loss. Michael, however, was suffering terribly from nausea. And his insurance didn't cover Zofran. So I sent him mine, which made me feel like a drug dealer. Which, as I told him, was better than feeling like a cancer patient.

He laughed, but later said the drugs didn't help. "Nothing works," he wrote.

As I e-mailed him back, strands of hair drifted down and fell on my keyboard. This was the new normal. I'd pick them up and toss them in the trash can under my desk. I began to dread combing my hair after a shower.

As a preemptive measure, I got a short Laurie Anderson spike haircut that I'd always wanted but was never bold enough to do, and it worked for a few weeks. Then, under the premise that it is better to jump than to fall, I shaved

“ I wasn't
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my head completely and got it henna tattooed.

Michael was not improving, though he acted as if the cancer were just an inconvenience. "Had I known," he wrote, "I would never have started this bathroom remodeling project." Family members were being tested for a bone marrow transplant match, without any luck.

Finally he e-mailed to tell me that he and his live-in girlfriend were moving to Portland for more treatment. "I am starting my life over," he wrote. "Everything I am letting go of in order to complete my healing." I knew it was his sweet way of signing off.

There is a yogi saying that people don't die of disease; they die when their life is complete. I found truth and comfort in that. I wasn't sure what would happen to Michael. I hoped he would find a cure and that I would meet up with him again at a better time.

Meanwhile, I started going to a new qigong class taught by one of the few people I'd found who'd had success with alternative treatments. The teacher, Joyce, was one of the lucky ones. After receiving a diagnosis of untreatable non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, she started doing qigong for hours each day, and credits that with putting her in remission. She believed in the benefits of qigong so strongly that she decided to start teaching it.

At the start of her class, a tall man with a ponytail and vivid blue eyes walked in, and I about fell off my chair. In a class of women and couples, he appeared to be alone.

"Everyone, this is Tom," Joyce said.

I knew my chances of striking up a romance with Tom were slim to none. I was still a bald chemo patient, despite my beautiful henna tattoo. But I held out hope that love would find me, if for no other reason than that it would have been the perfect antidote for this terrible time.

I made subtle, very subtle, moves on him, inching closer in class, checking him out. Once I trailed behind him walking to our cars. When he turned around, those blue eyes went right through me.

"Oh no," I thought. "Slow down."

After that six-week class ended, Joyce started another. She wanted me to come, but on top of everything else my car had died. "No problem," she said. "Tom can give you a ride. He lives right near you."

Carpooling with Tom to qigong class led to lunch, which led to dinner and a movie, which led to other get-togethers over several weeks. I couldn't quite believe my good fortune. But when he stopped calling me back, Joyce said, "He's not ready for a relationship, not by

a long shot.”

Around this same time I ran into Steve, a man I had fallen for in my 20's. We had dated for a while and even lived together for a few tumultuous months, but I hadn't seen him in three years. He was handsome — dark-haired with angular features —

and when I came upon him that day he was sitting in the same coffeehouse where he used to hang out, wearing a leather hat.

As I approached, he looked up from his table, taking in my bald head with a grin and said, “What is this? A new fashion statement?”

“No. I have cancer.”

“Me too!” he cried.

I looked more closely and saw missing patches of hair under his hat. He also had a chipped tooth.

I told him my story; he told me his. He'd been doing his photography and living in Prague. He was riding an escalator in a shopping center and suddenly fell face first, chipping his tooth. He woke up later in a Prague hospital with a brain cancer diagnosis.

Back in Seattle, he had surgery and radiation and was given three months to live. He was about one month into those three and living in a halfway house. He had slowly built up his strength by walking a couple of miles to get coffee. Then he made his way to a bus stop to take one bus and then another to his favorite coffeehouse in the university district of Seattle — the Allegro — where I found him.

As we were about to part, he smiled and said, “I think your prognosis is probably better than mine.”

I invited him over for dinner. He teased my daughter, telling her she became

invisible when he took his glasses off. Years ago, after one of our fights, he had said, “All I have is my love for you.”

Now I wanted him back, but he was as elusive as ever. I suspected he had another romantic interest, a woman he was hanging out with and teaching photography. “She's younger,” I noted to a friend, “and has hair.”

But I was wrong about that. Despite all the girlfriends he'd had over the years, and there were many — he died alone, right at his three-month mark. His mother was among the last to see him. “He couldn't speak,” she told me, “but he squeezed my hand and winked at me.”

A few months later Michael died too.

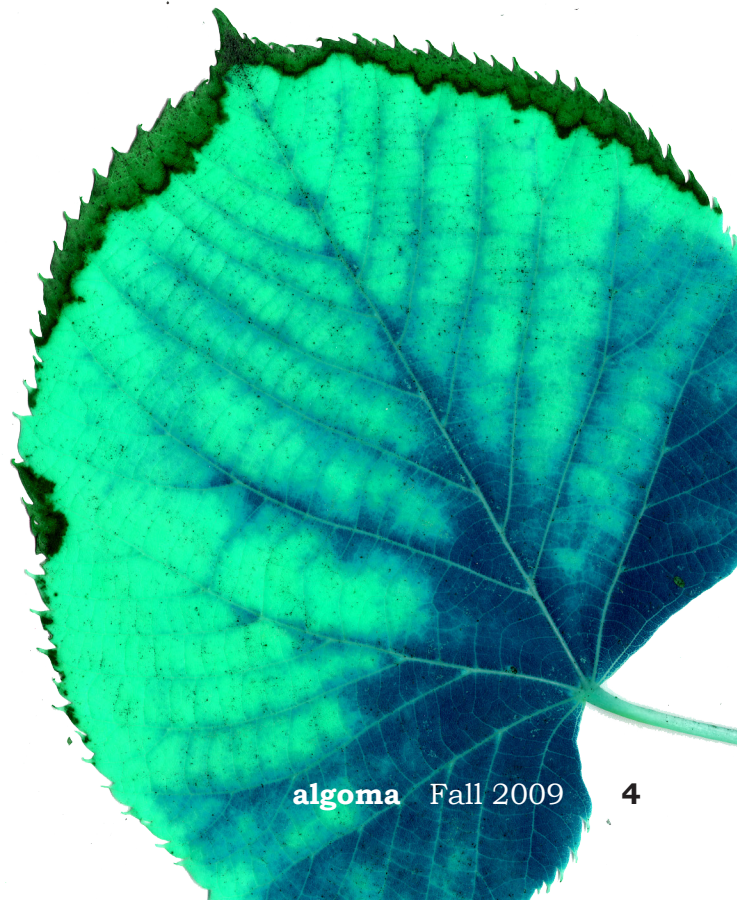
Chemotherapy gradually made me more and more lethargic. I grieved over the deaths of my former loves. The physician's assistant was quick to prescribe antidepressants, but they were

like sugar pills to me.

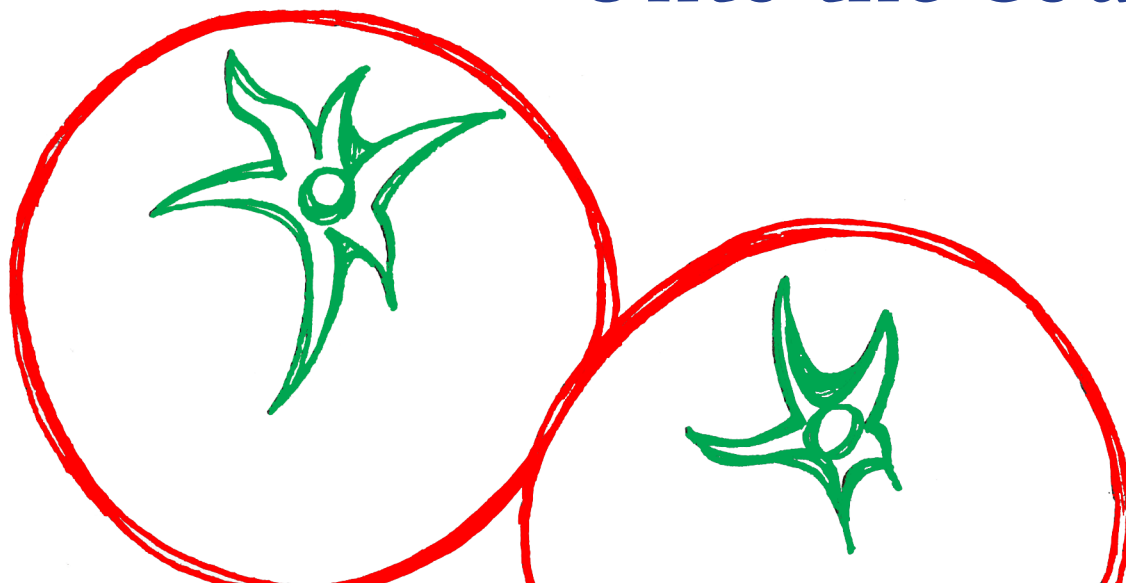
With all this time off from work I imagined I would accomplish something, write something, but instead I had no energy. I looked out the window and knew how the trees felt that had lost their leaves. This is what it was like to be old. But I had one thing to look forward to: spring.

And then spring arrived, in more ways than one. I had the lumpectomy and was told I had clean margins. My radiation therapy took place at the same hospital where Steve had been. As a favor, the technician brought up Steve's picture on the computer screen, and there he was, smiling back at me.

Life went on. My hair grew out. I found a new job. When friends asked if cancer had changed me, I wasn't sure how to answer. Was I changed? Had there been a purpose? I was reminded of the Buddhist saying: “Before enlightenment, (*continued p.45*)



Out of the Kitchen, Onto the Couch



By MICHAEL POLLAN

1. JULIA'S CHILDREN

I was only 8 when “The French Chef” first appeared on American television in 1963, but it didn’t take long for me to realize that this Julia Child had improved the quality of life around our house. My mother began cooking dishes she’d watched Julia cook on TV: boeuf bourguignon (the subject of the show’s first episode), French onion soup gratinée, duck à l’orange, coq au vin, mousse au chocolat. Some of the more ambitious dishes, like the duck or the mousse, were pointed toward weekend company, but my mother would usually test these out on me and my sisters earlier in the week, and a few of the others — including the boeuf bourguignon, which I especially loved — actually made it into heavy weeknight rotation. So whenever people talk about how Julia Child upgraded the culture of food in America, I nod appreciatively. I owe her. Not that I didn’t also owe Swanson, because we also ate TV dinners, and those were pretty good, too.

Every so often I would watch “The French Chef” with my mother in the den. On WNET in New York, it came on late in the afternoon, after school, and because we had only one television back then, if Mom wanted to watch her program, you watched it, too. The show felt less like TV than like hanging around the kitchen, which is to say, not terribly exciting to a kid (except when Child dropped the floor, which my mother promised would happen if we stuck around long enough) but comforting in its familiarity: the clanking of pots and pans, the squeal of an oven door in need of WD-40, all the kitchen-chemistry-set spectacles of transformation. The show was taped live and broadcast uncut and unedited, so it had a *vérité* feel completely unlike anything you might see today on the Food Network, with its A.D.H.D. editing and hyperkinetic soundtracks of rock music and clashing knives. While Julia waited for the (*continued p. 28*)