Time Travelers

On a rainy fall weekend, leaves brilliant with failing light, I hear Mr. Spock from my living room in rural Vermont: “Live long and prosper.” I smile, glad that James and Izzy have discovered Star Trek, good viewing for twelve-year-olds, especially those who are about to embark on a year-long adventure, “exploring new worlds, going where”—well, not no man but many men and women—“have gone before.” While I finish packing for our trip to Europe, the refrain echoes in my mind. “Live long and prosper.” Spock’s rendition of the traditional Jewish or Muslim blessing—“Salaam alayknum” or “Shalom aleichem,” meaning “peace be upon or with you”—is a greeting, a farewell, a wish, and a philosophy. To prosper is to do well, in health, matter, and mind. To live long is to acknowledge true prosperity: an abundance of time. “Live long and prosper,” however, is also an ironic reminder that time is the one absolute scarcity. None of us has a true abundance of time. Our days of living on this planet are surely limited, definitely scarce. When we seek to “prosper” only in the material sense, we forget that true prosperity is to make the very best use of our limited abundance of time.

One day before we leave, my “packing” is mostly the elimination of things. I sort while the kids watch television, determined that we won’t pay for extra baggage and that we won’t be overburdened in our travels. Our budget is very tight, for I have taken a 40% pay cut from my salary to have a sabbatical, a year free from teaching, to write. We must travel light, take only the minimum for a family of four for six months: a few changes of clothes, puffy warm jackets, iPads for the children’s schoolwork, my laptop so that I can write, and my wife Susan’s medicines and her art supplies so that she can paint. Injured in a fall down the stairs of the 10th century chateau for which we were caring seven years ago, she can no longer carry heavy bags, another reason to travel light. From the suitcases, I remove extra pairs of shoes, sweaters, and jeans. I take out all but one of the rocks from Izzy’s collection and six books from James’ library. Although they are almost teenagers, each has packed a favorite stuffed animal. I bury my nose into the softness of Felix, a black and white kitten, named for Izzy’s kitten who died, and Artie, an orangutan James has slept with since birth, inhaling the sweetness and tang of childhood, the warp speed of time passing, before tucking them back into the kids’ bags.
I slip two photographs—one of my mother beside a maple syrup bucket, taken just up the road on one of her solo visits to Vermont, and one of my father, looking just as I remember him when he stopped speaking to me fifteen years ago—into the envelope with the travel documents: passports, a checkbook and envelopes, a copy of our marriage license, legal only since 2014 though Susan and I have been a couple nearly twenty-five years, and copies of the children’s birth certificates, bearing both our names as parents, just in case we have to prove our legitimacy as a queer little family on the road.

Before I put my laptop into my pack, I back up my work for this year one more time. The book is a memoir called *Strangers in the Village*, which began with my last sabbatical, when Susan and I and our five-year-old twins cared for the chateau to ameliorate the sabbatical pay-cut. The book ends with my parents’ deaths, suddenly and unexpectedly, four days apart. Death like that—adrenalin- and emotion-charged—shakes one’s foundations. It removes you from ordinary life to your core, to the basics, and reminds you of your own mortality and the finite number of minutes allotted each human life. Just as I came gradually out of my grief, my sabbatical year just ahead, I came into my small inheritance from my mother and father. I determined that I would try to buy time.

**Bay of Biscay, Spain**

On a small boat on a glorious blue-sky day we cruise along the cliffs off the Bay of Biscay, part of a “geo-park” tour—our science lesson for today—bouncing on the waves, huddled in coats against the cold salt spray as we cut through the ocean. The cliffs jut up in layers of Schist and Gneiss, rocks that reveal some 1,000-million years of the history of this little blue ball of a planet spinning on the outer edge of the galaxy. We are fascinated with the tale this corner of Earth tells of time. James and Izzy, who have just turned 13, squeeze between Susan and me on the bench in the bow of the little boat, laughing, wriggling, pointing. They are at that magic moment between child and adult, switching back and forth between surly silence and silly play. Izzy sneaks her hand into my jacket pocket to hold my hand. Her eyes, the color of the sea and sky beyond, shine with tears from the wind, and her hair whips free of her pony-tail and across both our faces. “Thanks, Mom!” she shouts. “This is cool!” Just behind the porcelain skin of her cheekbones, the intensity of her brow, the sharp wit of her tongue, I see the woman she is about to become. I hold her slender fingers—almost as long as mine now—tight in
the secret darkness of my pocket until she slips free to point at the horizon where the sea and sky merge.

The Bay itself, we learn, is what remains of a great sea, and most of the coastline and the green land for a 100 miles inland was once under water. In slow motion, one of the Earth’s plates slammed into another, raising the Pyrenees mountains, lifting these cliffs above sea level, and pushing Spain north to form the Bay of Biscay, a big blue bowl on the edge of the Atlantic, all those millennia ago.

James and Izzy stand up in the bow of the boat to see better, to feel the salt spray, ignoring our shouts: “Be careful!” Susan leans her head on my shoulder. James grins into the sky and sea air, yelling something to Izzy, words lost in the wind.

We walk to the rocky beach and scramble along the cliffs, looking for fossilized sea creatures—snail trails, urchins, shells—500 million years old. We put our fingers on the curving layers of rock that mark the history of our planet. My children’s hands are pale, their bones and veins visible through translucent skin, compared to mine, which are scarred and rough and wrinkled, spotted with age. We trace stone layers packed with fossilized shells, fossilized soils, fossilized dinosaur bones and tracks—evidence of the rich early life of the shallow warm sea. We touch our fingertips to the black line known as the “Cretaceous–Paleocene extinction event boundary”—the mark that documents the moment 66 million years ago an asteroid the size of Manhattan crashed into the Yucatan Peninsula and created an explosion bigger than if all the world’s current nuclear arsenal exploded at once. “This is when the dinosaurs went extinct,” Izzy says. There are almost no fossils from living creatures in the layers of rock after that black line. It takes time, I think, to recover from devastation, like the time it has taken me to begin to recover from my parents’ deaths.

“Mom, look at this,” says James. He opens his palm to reveal a chunk of rock pulled from the cliff, the black trails of 100-million-year-old snails in the white limestone. His freckled cheeks dimple into the scar from a dog-bite he got just before our last sabbatical, when my mother was still alive, still able to reassure me: “It’ll disappear with time. He’ll forget it, mostly. Be grateful it wasn’t worse.” James’ face is longer now, I realize, narrower. A fuzz of pale gold hair glistens on his jaw in the rays of
setting sun. “Fossilized snail slime,” he says, grinning. I reach out to clasp the unmarked hands of my children, who, even though they have just turned thirteen, do not pull away.

**Peche Merle, France; Gargas, France; Ramales de la Victoria, Spain**

In the foothills north of the Pyrenees near Saint Bertrand de Comminges, we visit the *Grottes de Gargas*; north of Toulouse, we visit the caves at *Peche Merle*, and in Ramales de la Victoria in Cantabria, Spain, we visit *Cueva Covalanas*. Hundreds of these decorated caves have been discovered in Europe, but only a few are still open to the public. The experience of visiting evidence of human life 30,000 years old is humbling. We humans have prospered. We humans have lived long. But each of these lives—some 500 generations of individual lives—has also been short. Each of our individual lives is a single breath in a universal gale.

At *Peche Merle*, while waiting for our time to enter, we examine the timeline of history, a billboard stretching 100 feet down the sidewalk. At the beginning, 4,500 million years ago, the Earth is formed. As we walk 20 feet down the sidewalk, James traces the line on the board with a fingertip, like a boy with a stick on a fence, but here no rattling like the ticking of a clock as we traverse the millennia, from bacteria to dinosaurs and finally to our modern humans a mere 250 thousand years ago—down the sidewalk. The four of us gaze back along the timeline; all of human life is the last two feet of a hundred feet of time—a paragraph in a library—Susan steps closer to me and I put my arm over her shoulders to hug her. Our twenty-five years together is an expanse of faceted crystal too small to be measured here. As the tour begins, I hold her hand to steady her into the darkness.

The *Grottes de Gargas* consist of two very different main caves, connected in more modern times by a passage. All of the caves we visit are like these, well-preserved, pathways marked and lights installed to highlight the most important or accessible paintings and etchings. Numbers allowed on tours are strictly regulated to decrease the deterioration our breaths and bacteria will cause in the fragile art. We are lucky to visit these now, before they too will be closed, too precious for tourists. In the first cave at Gargas, we see etchings of ibex, horses, and other animals carved into the walls about 15,000 years ago. The guide speaks some English and is solicitous of the children, inviting them to the
front, close to where she uses her red laser pointer to identify the parts of the creatures’ outlines. I see Izzy scowl, offended to be included among “les enfants,” and when I give her a little push forward, she glares at me, her headlamp at the level of my eyes. She’s grown three inches this year.

We see deer, mammoth, bear, horses, and otters, painted and carved in each of the caves we visit. In two caves are drawings of women, perhaps goddesses, breasts and vulva emphasized, for women are the bearers of life. For women are providers of more time, the prosperity of fertility, in the scarcity of individual life. I did not bear James and Izzy from my body, so I am doubly enriched by their lives in mine, I think. I watch my daughter frowning at the outline of the woman, embarrassed because she’s thirteen, at the moment before her own fertility makes her a symbol of the prosperity of time. “Be fruitful and multiply,” the Judeo-Christian-Muslim god directed, his divine injunction to the humans he had created. “Replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” Have we exceeded expectations? Has the injunction to prosper made us too foolish to learn to limit ourselves, to remember that we are also directed to replenish the earth, which, like our lives, has limits.

We follow the guide through the modern tunnel to the second cave at Gargas, where the art, dated to around 25,000 years old, is comprised of at least 192 negative prints of hands made by blowing ground charcoal or manganese oxides and red iron oxides mixed with ocher yellow goethite across hands of men, women, and children so that an outline relief was created. It is as if we, a little American family in the echoing and dripping darkness underground, are encircled by the hands of our human community across time. No one knows for certain why our ancestors made these images. It’s drippy and spooky to know that an ancient human—an art-maker, a communicator—touched this wall with a hand like mine. We are breathing, in some way, the same cool damp air those humans breathed, connected through this touch to stone, to Earth. These individuals prospered, in their own way, reaching across time with this art, this mysterious communication, to touch and speak to the future.

At Peche Merle, James and Izzy stand, fascinated, comparing the size of their own feet to the barefoot print of a child who lived and died more than 25,000 years ago. One moment in the life of an ancient child stepping in mud connected to one moment in the lives of these two television-watching,
world-traveling children, whose feet at this very moment are outgrowing their sneakers, who now can wear their mothers’ shoes.

Finally, in Ramales, Spain, where the cave is much smaller and we are only a foot from the drawings of a herd of horses and antelope migrating across the walls into the earth’s darkness, a return to the womb, we feel connected across time, lost in space with other humans, the water dripping.

**Delphi, Greece**

It is the “Fragments of Amazons” that make me cry at Delphi.

In the museum, which is arranged chronologically, we first encounter the goddess figures, little terracotta models of beak-nosed and breasted bird-women painted with red designs. We will see goddess figures of all types and shapes and sizes, again and again, as we travel around the Peloponnese Peninsula. Some are dated as far back as 10,000 years, some hacked from stone before there were metal tools, some molded or modeled in red earth clay, some etched in ivory or metals, some forged from bronze or gold, some carved in marble.

But it is the left-over bits of the friezes that once adorned the top edges of the temples at Delphi that make me cry. The pictures are stories, 5,000-year-old myths, in which Greek heroes—men with impassive expressions, tall and calm and muscled—fight battles to overcome the “pagan” and “monstrous,” representing, the info cards tell us, the chaos of the uncivilized past. James and I talk about how this is evidence of the transition from the worship of the earth and fertility goddesses of prehistory to the Greek pantheon of a family of murdering, conquering, jealous and passionate gods, led by Zeus, a contemporary of that other god, Jehovah, who was no less violent but who had considerably fewer followers, tribal and nomadic peoples with little wealth for statues and great marble temples until after Christ’s time. “But why did it change?” James has asked. “Why did they stop worshiving women?” And I have to say that I don’t know. Perhaps it was the simple growth of human population and the accompanying competition for land and resources that led to a world that valued war and physical strength over hearth and home. Maybe the move from a purely agricultural earth-centered culture to one that created and traded tools and objects rendered fertility and the reproduction
of life less mysterious and special. Perhaps it was just another institutionalization of the desire to dominate.

James puts his hand in mine. “Are you crying?” he asks in astonishment. I do not often cry and almost never in public. I shed most of my tears for my parents’ deaths alone, in private. But the fragments left of the sculptures representing the Amazons—a tribe of women warriors, who may or may not be complete myth—fighting the Greek heroes, moves me. Here are the last vestiges of powerful women for many generations to come. Hippolyta is felled, but she does not give up, her sword raised to Theseus even as he runs her through with a spear. On one of the marble chunks, all that remains of an Amazon is a wrist. Others have been reduced to an ankle, a breast, or a foot in a sandal. One Amazon is nothing but toes struggling for balance, for solid footing on the earth where she was once worshipped. I can’t help but cry. “I’m not like that, am I, Mom?” my boy asks, and I laugh and wipe my tears. Because no, he idolizes John Lennon and the Dali Lama and is neither a warrior nor monster. He, I hope, is of the next version of hero, of truly civilized human history.

In archeological museums all over Greece, entire rooms are filled with votives, small sculptures of people or animals that pilgrims placed at Delphi’s temples to offer continued prayer in their absence. Thousands of little votives were made of clay or bronze and represent the prayers of a veritable army. Wishes for long life and prosperity are no doubt among these prayers. Indeed, aren’t all wishes—for cures, for health, for wealth, for peace—wishes for long life and prosperity? At heart, isn’t every prayer a prayer for these two essential and scarce things? For riches in moments.

James finds a replica of a rhinoceros votive at a gift shop, and I buy it for him. When he holds that rhino, he will remember this moment—his hand in mine, our little family together abroad in the world—long after my moments are gone. Though he does not know it, the rhino is my votive for him, a prayer that he may have a long life and prosper. That he lives in this moment, this one precious and abundant life, fully here. That he is a hero for a better civilization.

**Rome, Italy**

We encounter the Roman Empire in remote corners all over Europe—Roman roads across rural France, mansions with under-floor heating and indoor plumbing on the edge of Spain, heated baths in
England, glorious sculptures at Delphi and Olympia, Greece—but it is in the Coliseum of Rome that the excesses excused by “civilization” make us sick. We sit on the stones in the vast arena and examine the maps in our guidebook. Between about 300 B.C.E. and 300 C.E., the Romans became the first world power, spreading a new version of “civilization” across Europe, the Middle East and Africa, slaughtering and enslaving the “barbarian” natives, appropriating their lands, stealing and taxing their resources. “Why did they want so much stuff?” James asks. “Why didn’t they leave those people alone to just live?”

Here is a paradox of abundance. The Romans transformed prosperity into a material value—money, land, resources, labor, things. And they were so successful at acquiring these things that they had to use them up—even destroy them—to create a scarcity necessitating the acquisition of more things. The “games” of this arena—just one step from the games of Olympia, where women and laurel wreaths were the prizes—were displays glorifying the conquest and acquisition of booty by slaughtering it, and “entertainments” to consume time—and to keep blood-lust high for the next round of acquisitional warfare—for around 60,000 people each show. Trajan’s war victory celebration lasted more than 100 days, and resulted in the slaughter of more than 11,000 wild animals and 10,000 humans. Multiplied over the 300 years the Coliseum was actively used for such “games,” it’s likely that this most successful “civilization” was responsible for the deaths of few million zebras, giraffes, elephants, lions, bears, leopards, peasants, criminals, Jews, Christians, Muslims, criminals, pagans, slaves, and ordinary people who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. So far removed in just a few centuries, I think, from the herds of creatures secreted in the prehistoric caves in the womb of the earth.


Izzy and James choose postcards of the Coliseum at night. On the train, as they are writing to their friends back home, Izzy reads the postcard caption: “The walls of the Coliseum are lit in gold to celebrate each victory in the world-wide fight against the death penalty.” She looks at me. “Well, that’s one good thing,” she says. “Right?”

I smile. In this century of civilization—my children’s century—maybe we humans are learning, slowly, after all, the truth of prosperity... of time.
In Venice, we go full-tourist, buying masks for Carnival, taking a ride on a gondola, and taking the children to their first opera. We are lucky to arrive in February, with excellent weather and smaller crowds, just before the most intense part of Carnival—the city’s two-week festival before Lent, celebrated since around 1100. On the streets and canals, in the Piazza San Marco, everywhere we are delighted by masked and costumed subversions of the Medieval class system—flirting nuns; men dressed as women; the poor pretending to be rich—because, of course, we are a boundary-crossing family. Izzy shops carefully for her mask, finding just the right disguise for a girl about to be a woman, for her glamorous night out at the opera.

It is estimated that 30 million tourists a year visit Venice, a city whose limited number of minutes are almost gone. Inhabited since the first century CE, a powerful city-state ruling the Mediterranean Sea in the Middle Ages, the Italians now call the city of islands and canals “Veniceland,” because it is like Disneyland, a place inhabited primarily by tourists. “The people can’t afford to live here,” our tour guide in the Jewish ghetto tells us. The city is sinking and sea levels are rising. Boardwalks are stacked along the streets, ready to be put into use when the *aqua alta* come in. The whole city is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, but UNESCO has threatened to put it on the “endangered” list if cruise ships—which dump as many as 30,000 people a day on shore and damage the fragile lagoon and architectural structures of the city—are not banned. The residents, our gondolier says, no longer use the first floors of their homes because they flood regularly. In a thousand years, we humans have managed to change the Earth’s climate, speeding up the count-down to ecosystem collapse, and we are too stubborn and greedy to make the necessary changes to save ourselves, to save the treasure that is Venice. Here we have built beauty, romance, mystery, a real dream-world, but it is a place we humans are loving to death. Susan and I feel complicit and a little guilty as we learn the history and the future of Venice with the children, but we love the place too.

On our way home from the opera we stop on a bridge, fog roiling along the streets and wisping around rooftops, the waters greenish under a half-moon, to listen to a guitarist. A young couple is kissing, and James and Izzy are giggling with their heads together. I wonder if the couple making out
now, gazing into each other’s eyes as if in a movie, is one of the “too many to count” couples our gondolier told us had become engaged on his boat on Valentine’s Day, the day before our ride. I hold Susan’s hand in my pocket. In not many more minutes, I think, James and Izzy will emerge from puberty to find lovers of their own. Will they remember this cinematic moment on the bridge, the guitarist, the waters slapping as the fog encircles our ankles, Izzy in her mask and all of us in our best clothes, dried tears from the tragic death of the diva in La Bohème on our cheeks? Over in the Piazza San Marco, the iron men strike the bell at the top of the hour, time passing slow in each echoing bong, marking the last moments of the day, even as the city sinks inexorably into the sea.

**Borghese Gallery, Rome**

Time is frozen in marble so supple and alive that it seems we have walked in on the exact moment that everything changes. Bernini’s *Apollo and Daphne* is my favorite sculpture in the world, though this is only my second time with it. I have become separated from my family, but I can spend the whole day with these characters in white, these young two enacting the saddest moment in mythology. I walk slowly to the back of the gallery, the way that the original was meant to be approached. Here the young man, Apollo, seems simply to be running to touch the hip of the young woman, Daphne, who is running away, glancing back at him. I walk around to see the couple’s expressions—his smile, not quite a leer, but clearly enjoying the chase—and her fear, her absolute anguish—and the moment of transformation changes. The moment captured here is tragic, the stopping of time as well as its endlessness in immortality. The woman’s hands branch into leaves. She is terrified.

Izzy strolls in and circles the statue slowly, joining me at Daphne’s foot, half-raised, roots stretching from her sole into the earth.

“The story goes that Apollo teased Cupid, who shot him with an arrow so that he fell in love with Daphne,” she lectures. “She was a follower of Diana, who, like, hunted and lived in the woods and vowed to stay a virgin.” Izzy’s whisper drops even softer on the word “virgin.” She is as beautiful as the frightened girl in stone. “Anyway,” she continues, “when he was about to catch her she screamed
out to her father to save her—he was like a river god—so he turns her into a laurel tree to keep her from being raped by Apollo.”

We observe the bark creeping over the girl’s skin, the whorls of her hair flung back as she turns, the expression—her final look at the world before transformation—of shock, her mouth in an O, something lost, hopeless, in those blank marble eyes. “He looks kind of like, oh well, not a big deal, lost this one,” Izzy says. “Like it’s just another race or competition.” She sighs, exasperated, flinging her hands out. “But she’s a tree. Like forever.”

I nod. Was this really the best her father could do when she cried out for his help? Save her by making her a laurel tree? Is that really saving her?

“That’s why they put a crown of laurel leaves on the winners at the Olympics,” Izzy says. “Because Apollo said he would always love her even if she was a tree.”

I think of the conquests of sport, the games of war and death in the Coliseum, the entertainments that consume our time.

Izzy snorts. “Love. Right.”

We, I think, are at a moment of transformation every day, every moment. I think my father would have preferred I became a tree instead of becoming a lesbian. Will James and Izzy’s transformations allow them to grow, to branch out, to be rooted while they sprout greenly into the world, or will those changes condemn them to lives of rough bark for skin, roots that keep them not stable but stuck, leaves and branches that keep them safe from all touch, all violation, but made of marble, trapped in the moment of fear? I hope I am not the parent who can think of nothing but stasis as a solution. I pray silently for the wisdom to make the most of this time, to teach James and Isabelle to grow, to branch out, to be rooted while sprouting greenly into the world. To live long and to prosper.

**Florence, Italy**

James and Izzy and I climb the 450 steps up to the top of Brunelleschi’s Dome in the Duomo, Florence’s great Cathedral, Santa Maria del Fiori, and I do not have a heart attack. The Vasari-Zuccari frescos that decorate the ceiling of the Duomo, which we pass next to halfway up, depict The Last Judgment, that moment at the very end of time when God destroys Earth and calls up all the souls for
sorting. The moment for which the Christians are preparing, in faith, in life. Is it possible to wish others long life and prosperity when you do not believe in an end to your time? Is it possible to care for this Earth as a legacy to your children when you do not believe the Earth is for generations to come?

Raised a fundamentalist, I recognize all too well the Hell under Brueelleschi’s Dome. I know the final apocalypse to be a reality, a goal, not just a dream or hope, for these people, and I wonder—looking up at the lush clouds of their heaven, the blissed-out expressions of those saved—how we can rationally expect them to choose wisely for the long-term health of our world in this moment. How can those who live their lives on Earth for a life-after-death be trusted to make life better for anyone?

“Nana believed this stuff, right?” James asks. I nod, remembering my mother helping me weed my garden in Vermont, the year before she died.

“Yes,” I say, “but she still believed in making the most of life on Earth. You know, she told me that she voted for Obama behind my dad’s back, because she thought the Democrats would do a better job at protecting the environment.”

“Nana really loved nature,” Izzy says. She—a budding gardener herself, following in my mother’s footsteps—is taking a class on agriculture and climate change online and closely following the news, watching in disbelief the demolition of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. We have talked a lot about world religions on this trip, and about how those beliefs—over evidence—can shape behavior and policy. We are all quiet for a moment, looking at the images on the domed ceiling—like those in the prehistoric caves—with which human artists stop time and imagine time eternal.

“This Satan is more human,” James says. “There’s more action, more going on.” He spins slowly, walking the narrow catwalk around the dome, examining the painting. “The perspective makes it look like the demons are reaching out to grab you.” We glance over the railing to the cathedral floor far below, where the illiterate peasants would have spent the church services learning to fear God and Satan—and an eternity in hell—through these paintings. “It’s creepy, really.” Is a faith built on intimidation sustainable? For the Christians, who believe that life has no end, does time have less value? Do they walk the timeline of Earth history or touch the black line of the extinction event believing that these times are all the same time? Why would anyone choose to look forward to the apocalypse of the meteorite?
Izzy tsks. “Those demons are way too happy,” she says in disgust.

We exit the catwalk and trudge up the ever-narrower spiraling staircase, squeezing past others, on their way down, now inside the painting, I think, between the ceiling and the outer shell of the dome. We examine the ribs of the architectural accomplishment—the largest dome of its time—until suddenly we emerge into light. The full moon is golden with sunset and all of Florence—the pink and green and white marble of the Baptistery and Bell Tower glowing, the red tile rooftops stretching down to the Arno and up the hills—around us. Somewhere down there is Susan. My heart slows down, and I catch my breath. We take a selfie. I take photos for a young couple, for a young man alone, for a large Italian family, and one of them takes a photo of us. James voices what we are all thinking: “I wish Mommy could be here too.”

We stomp down much more quickly than we climbed up. This time we barely glance at the apocalypse paintings, the old man god in his golden throne, weighing the souls of the humans who have toiled and labored, who have been fruitful and multiplied, who have replenished the Earth. “I think this will be my last time up these stairs,” I say. “Next time you’ll do it on your own,” I tell the kids. “Maybe even with your own kids.” They laugh.

We walk out across the piazza, the great dome far above us, the green and pink and white of the complex still bright in the fading light, and there is Susan, walking toward us, cane in one hand, a shopping bag in the other. “This will be Mom’s last time!” James announces.

“It was great!” Izzy says.

They dutifully answer Susan’s art history questions, then race ahead across the piazza, summoned by gelato.

“Your last time,” Susan says, as we walk slowly after them. “I’ve never been up,” she says. “The first time I let you go up and I stayed here with the babies,” she says. “The second time I was here, I was talking to one group of students while the other teacher took the rest up.” She shakes her head sadly. “I always thought I would go the next time. That I would have another chance.” She looks rueful. I fill in the gap; and then she fell down the tower stairs, hurt her back, became disabled. “I’ll never see the frescos up close,” she says.
I take the shopping bag and hug her. “I’m sorry,” I say. And I am. It’s a lesson we are learning too slowly. Live now. Be here now. We both order double scoops of gelato.

Saint Araille, France

Returning to our friends’ chateau after five months on the road feels like coming home. Almost home. The chateau was our home on our last sabbatical, and we know its crooked old stairs and ghostly corners and unruly rose bushes tumbling down from the walls. We know Pete and we know Rosie, who have become part of our family. We decide to spend our last six weeks here, because we are so conscious of time.

Pete is 86, already older than my parents at their deaths. He has recovered well from a stroke a couple of years ago, and he and I share a genetic propensity for blood clotting, the killer of my mother and father. He and Rosie visited us in Vermont the year before last, while I was still numb, feeling empty, destitute, with my losses. Unlike my own father, Pete cares not that I am a lesbian. He loves my wife and my children as well as me. He is kind and gentle, philosophical. I love him too. “I’ve been chatting with the monks,” he laughs when I meet him coming up from the gardens, and I know he means the ghosts of the monks who once lived in this ancient place. Pete understands that time overlaps itself. He has been out with his border collies for a walk on this spring day, pink quince and white wild plums like lace on the edge of the forest, where the trees are still sticks, still barked and rooted and just sprouting green at their fingertips.

I think of Daphne, forever the laurel. “I’ve been watching the magpies building a nest in the tree-tops outside the tower window,” I tell him.

James and Izzy climb down from the tree house we built in the chestnut tree seven years ago to play with the dogs. The younger dog, Daisy, pesters the old dog, Ginny, who gives her a warning growl.

“We’re thinking of a puppy,” Pete says, raising an eyebrow and a half-grin.

An owl has chicks in the rafters of our apartment living room, chittering at dusk and dawn, just above the television set, which, James and Izzy have discovered, receives Star Trek reruns in the evenings. I labor up the steps to the tower apartment and come in from my talk with Pete to see Spock’s fingers in the V of greeting.
It is spring. We have shown James and Izzy the sites of southern Europe, using my inheritance to invest in time, though the cost of our losses—the empty places left by my mother and her generous and green version of Christianity, and my father’s now-eternal silence, his final judgment irrevocable—seem as vast as all time. But the money has been a kind of Starship Enterprise, allowing us to move through history, across the planet and, among the universe of ideas and philosophies and peoples. It has allowed us to make the most of this bit of our abundant and scarce little time. We have, for this moment, lived long. We have prospered.

Today the world is green. Pete knocks on the glass door of the tower apartment, and I look up to see him—the familiar creases of his grin—and wave him in. “I’ve come to listen to the baby owls above,” he says. “And there may be a puppy....” We turn off Spock to hear about it.