

Margie Sarsfield
margiesarsfield@gmail.com
www.margiesarsfield.com
865-454-9614

About Me

I'm a versatile content writer and editor with a passion for crafting engaging narratives that connect with audiences and drive results. With a background spanning creative storytelling, SEO-driven web content, and meticulous editing, I blend research with creativity to transform ideas into clear, compelling messages. I take pride in my ability to adapt my voice to suit a variety of industries and formats, whether it's developing blog posts that captivate readers, producing polished articles, or refining copy for maximum impact. My work is a reflection of my commitment to quality, authenticity, and a deep understanding of the power of words. When I'm not writing, I enjoy exploring local art scenes, reading broadly to fuel my creativity, and finding inspiration in the everyday. I'm excited to share my portfolio with you and look forward to helping you tell your story in a way that resonates.

[Excerpt from Stokesdale is Not a Trail Town](#)

An excerpt from an reportage-style essay about citizens in conflict over the possibility of allowing a long-distance hiking trail go through their town

[Current Treatment Methods for Dermatillomania](#)

A blog article exploring treatment options for people with dermatillomania, written for the general public

[What Do Alpha-GPC Supplements Do?](#)

An excerpt from an ebook about supplements for cognitive health, written for readers with some knowledge of the subject matter

[How to Make Your Own Beats: A Beginner's Guide to Crafting Great Rap & Hip-Hop Tracks](#)

A sponsored article providing introductory advice on beat-making meant to guide readers to a specific product

[Mount Washington: LA's Hidden Urban Oasis](#)

A brief, comprehensive reference guide to a neighborhood in LA written for a real estate blog

[Figs: A Brief History](#)

A short fiction piece showcasing my ability to explore social issues through storytelling

[Excerpt from Four Dead Animals: An Ethnography of Roadkill in the Age of the Anthropocene](#)

An excerpt from an essay blending personal reflection, research, and philosophy to explore the casually destructive relationship between humans and nonhuman animals in contemporary society

Excerpt from Stokesdale is Not a Trail Town

The highlights of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail include Mt. Mitchell and Jockey's Ridge, respectively the highest mountain and highest sand dunes in the Eastern U.S. The elevation ranges from 6,684 feet in the mountains to below sea level at the shore. It goes through 37 counties, four national parks, three national forests, two national wildlife refuges, and ten state parks; it passes three lighthouses and includes two ferry rides. Risks include: alligators, black bears, biting flies, chiggers, waterborne diseases, dog attacks, dehydration, mosquitos, poison ivy, severe weather, steep grades, tick-borne diseases, traffic collisions, venomous snakes, and yellowjackets—all of which you could run into in your own backyard, depending on where you live.

I'm fond of the MST even though we came face-to-face with a few of those hazards: unchained dogs chased us down a deserted country lane, we hiked in uneven gulleys beside parkways breathing the grimy backdraft of tractor-trailers, I got sick from creekwater collected on the far side of Shortoff Mountain and we had to hitch a ride to the Pixie Motor Lodge in Linville. And, honestly, by the time we got to the beach, I was over it—mostly because I have never liked the beach, which begs the question of why I chose a trail that would end at the beach—but that's on me, it's not the trail's fault. I'm fond of it because of the guy who picked us up hitchhiking in Ocracoke, whose dentures sat in the center console of his truck and who asked us if we liked “beach music”; and because of rhododendron and mountain laurel; and because of Earl “Pawpaw” Ammons' bear hunting stand in Balsam Knob; and because of the geese at Hard Times Beach; and because of Waynesville, Asheville, Linville, Greenville, Statesville, Bakersville, Boonville, Pikeville, Granville, Small-billsville, Windowsillville, Hold-stillvill, Hank-Hillville, Thou-Shalt-Not-Killville and All-the-Money-in-the-Tillville; and because Ryan and I were the recipients of extraordinary generosity, submerged in the milk of human kindness; and because whatever town we swept into, we just as quickly and as easily swept out.

*

When colonizers arrived at Roanoke in the late 16th century, there were over thirty tribes living on the land that would be partitioned into North Carolina. By the start of the nineteenth century, colonization reduced a population of over 100,000 to ~20,000.

The Tuscarora people of the coastal plain region were pushed out of their land, barred from hunting near colonist farms, cheated in trades, and captured and sold into slavery before attempting to fight back in the Tuscarora Indian War. Midway through this war, they signed a peace treaty; the colonizers broke the treaty almost immediately, of course. The Tuscarora lost the war, of course. Most of the remaining Tuscarora, those who had not been killed or sold into slavery, moved north. That is, more or less, the story of North Carolina's native peoples. Some tribes were more affected by disease than war (not that disease is not its own form of war), others were pushed off and away rather than outright killed, but all were devastated by the intrusion of white people on their land.

Today, the state of North Carolina recognizes eight tribes: the Cherokee, Coharie, Lumbee, Haliwa-Saponi, Sappony, Meherrin, Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation, and the Waccamaw-Siouan. Stokesdale and its neighboring towns in Guilford County was probably home to the Occaneechi, Haw, Eno, Saura, and Keyauwee tribes. *Guilford County: A Brief History*, a book whose preface offers an apology for not being an exhaustive account of the area, has one sentence devoted to the indigenous people who lived there:

“Virtually all of the Siouan-speaking native Americans were gone, victims of [colonization], so that the land was uninhabited.”

While the Mountains-to-Sea Trail only goes through one state, it actually exists within two countries, travelling through the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation as it winds down from the mountains. The Cherokee were also victims of treaty- and promise-breaking colonizers, forced in 1777 to give up all their land east of the Blue Ridge Mountains, then forced to move to Oklahoma along the Trail of Tears in 1838. We passed through Cherokee, the town, also known as *Elawodi* (RW0J) in Tsalagi or “Yellow Hill”, as we left the Smokies very early in the hike.

The year we hiked was the first year the trail went through the Cherokee nation. In July 2015, the Cherokee Tribal Council unanimously voted to become “an official sponsor of the section of trail within the Mountains-to-Sea Trail project that crosses tribal trust lands.” Before that, the trail wound steeply, and dangerously, along bustling sections of the Blue Ridge Parkway and around and through several tunnels, taking on an additional eight miles of unpleasant road-walking. Now, the trail cuts downhill through tulip-poplars, hemlocks, red maples and sourwoods – the sounds of cars is distant, the road a ribbon glimpsed between tree trunks – before depositing hikers on three miles of gravel road with little traffic. This agreement between

the Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail and the Cherokee took nearly a decade to come to fruition: not without cause. I wouldn't trust white people, either.

Even in Stokesdale, though, the trail owed a debt to the people who were there before colonizers landed in Roanoke: Highway 158 was a connecting trail between the Cherokee people of the West and Eastern tribes long before it was a quasi-official part of the MST.

*

Around the same time period that the Cherokee were deliberating on whether or not to adopt some miles of the MST, the trail continued to exist in Stokesdale – mostly in the form of nebulous murmurings, unofficial trail guides like the one Ryan and I were using, and the occasional backpacker hiking down US Highway 158. Frank Bruno attended conferences and Mayor Braswell lodged complaints. In January 2015, Mayor Braswell went on record stating that he would never be in favor of eminent domain–taking private property, with compensation, for governmental use—and Frank Bruno said that there would be no eminent domain necessary.

“The trail that’s been planned for Stokesdale isn’t final,” he said. “The liaison for the Mountains-To-Sea would work with us so the trail wouldn’t go over any property that was owned by someone who didn’t want the trail there. The trail could actually follow US 158, parts of it actually do.”

“I wouldn’t want the trail to go over my land,” Mayor Braswell said.

In June 2015, Frank Bruno brought up the topic of Linear Park in downtown Stokesdale. The people who used to mow it for free, out of love for their town, were moving to Mount Airy. They needed new volunteers to step up and take care of the park. Tim Jones, who was not yet a councilmember but who would be soon, spoke from the audience: he owned a section of Linear Park, and he wanted to know if the MST was going to come through Stokesdale, and if it did, if eminent domain would be employed. Frank Bruno said no.

“We already have walking trails in Stokesdale,” Tim Jones said. “I don’t see why we need that Mountains-To-Sea Trail. I think we need to be looking at the money the town has been spending to pay for everything, including the Town Park. I don’t want to see that spending get out of control. I don’t want to get to a place where we have to pay a property tax.”

“Are you willing to be added to a list of volunteers who’ll mow the park?” Vicki White-Lawrence asked. A reasonable question, since Tim Jones was asserting ownership over the land.

“No,” Tim Jones said. “There’s liability issues there.”

The following month, Mayor Braswell suggested that they “put up a map of Stokesdale with some markers on a table in Council Chambers and let people come in and mark where the trail should go. They can use green to say yes, the trail can go over my property and red for no. That’d be helpful for figuring out how we can put this trail together.” This, as far as I can tell, never happened.

Current Treatment Methods for Dermatillomania

Dermatillomania, or compulsive skin-picking, can be devastating for both the individual and their loved ones. The scars it leaves behind aren't just physical—they can affect self-esteem, social interactions, work performance, and overall quality of life. Fortunately, several treatment methods can help those suffering from dermatillomania find relief and regain control over their lives.

Most experts agree that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is one of the most effective treatments for dermatillomania. CBT focuses on increasing self-awareness and developing healthier coping strategies by addressing both the behavior and the underlying thoughts. Two specific approaches within CBT used for this condition are Habit-Reversal Training (HRT) and Mindfulness-Based CBT. In Habit-Reversal Training, patients are encouraged to monitor their skin-picking behaviors by keeping a detailed diary that helps identify the feelings triggering the urge, the context in which the behavior occurs, and the specific patterns associated with it. Recognizing these patterns is crucial in learning how to interrupt and eventually change the habit. Meanwhile, Mindfulness-Based CBT teaches patients to acknowledge and experience unpleasant emotions rather than using skin-picking as an escape. By learning mindfulness techniques, individuals can better manage stress and anxiety, reducing the impulse to engage in self-destructive behavior. Therapists often incorporate exercises such as delaying the urge to pick for a set period, thereby reinforcing that skin-picking is a controllable choice.

Another treatment option is Stimulus Control Therapy, which focuses on identifying and minimizing environmental triggers that lead to skin-picking. This approach involves recognizing common triggers—such as spending excessive time in front of the mirror or succumbing to boredom—and making practical adjustments to reduce exposure to these triggers. For instance, fogging a bathroom mirror or keeping a safe distance from it can help, as can wearing gloves or using thick press-on nails to make the act of picking more difficult. Stimulus Control Therapy is generally most effective when combined with other therapeutic methods.

While there is currently no medication specifically approved for dermatillomania, certain medications can help alleviate underlying conditions that contribute to the behavior. Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs), such as Celexa, Prozac, Zoloft, and Paxil, are often

prescribed because they help regulate serotonin levels in the brain, a key hormone involved in mood regulation. These medications are typically used alongside therapy to address co-occurring issues like depression, anxiety, or OCD. It is important to note that finding the right medication or dosage can take time, and medications should always be taken under the guidance of a psychiatrist.

Alternative therapies may also offer benefits. A high-vitamin, vegetable-based diet can aid in physical recovery from skin damage, reduce itching, and improve overall mental health by alleviating symptoms of depression and anxiety. Hypnosis can guide patients into a relaxed state, reducing stress while teaching them to resist the urge to pick. Similarly, meditation helps by lowering stress levels and promoting inner reflection, which can illuminate the underlying causes of skin-picking and lead to healthier coping strategies.

In summary, dermatillomania is a complex condition with significant emotional and physical impacts, but multiple treatment methods provide hope for those affected. Whether through various forms of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Stimulus Control Therapy, medication, or alternative therapies such as diet, hypnosis, and meditation, there are many avenues available for treatment. Combining these methods often yields the best results, empowering sufferers to take control of their impulses and lead healthier, more fulfilling lives. If you or someone you know struggles with dermatillomania, consider reaching out to a healthcare professional who can tailor a treatment plan to your unique needs.

What Do Alpha-GPC Supplements Do?

Choline plays a critical role in creating neurotransmitters; cholinergic neurons can become damaged and break down due to age or toxicity. Alpha-GPC, a chemical comprised largely of choline, helps protect and reverse damage to these critical systems. Alpha-GPC is thought to increase the amount of acetylcholine in the brain; acetylcholine is one of the most important neurotransmitters related to memory and cognitive abilities.

In a study that involved the chemical scopolamine, an amnesiac, Alpha-GPC was found to counteract the amnesiac effects and reverse memory loss. At least thirteen clinical trials have tested the memory-boosting effects of Alpha-GPC, and each study has shown that the chemical has demonstrable benefits, especially for those already suffering from memory loss or degradation. One study showed that patients experienced as much as 15.6% improvement in memory. The studies also found that Alpha-GPC had significant attention-enhancing properties; study participants also showed more stable moods, less irritability, and more interest in their environment. Whether this is an effect of Alpha-GPC itself or an effect of its benefits on attention and memory is unclear, but it does imply that Alpha-GPC is an important supplement for brain health and longevity.

Experiments comparing Alpha-GPC to both caffeine and phosphatidylserine (a stimulant) have revealed that Alpha-GPC can significantly increase a person's ability to focus during times of anxiety, as well as speeding up reaction times. Alpha-GPC is also theorized to be "neuroprotective", meaning that it can protect the brain against toxins, especially glutamate. Glutamate, while naturally occurring in the brain, can be toxic in large amounts. Alpha-GPC has the potential to guard against glutamate and other toxins that can damage the brain.

Alpha-GPC's memory- and cognition-boosting effects are thought to come from the way it interacts with a protein; Protein Kinase C, or PKC, is potentially associated with our ability to form memories, as well as store those memories long-term. Alpha-GPC was found, in a study conducted on rats, to assist the movement of PKC between cells and especially in the hippocampus. The rats in the experiment showed demonstrable growth in their ability to learn new tasks.

While there's no evidence of exactly how much Alpha-GPC affects acetylcholine levels, studies suggest that the frontal cortex receives the most benefits and shows the most acetylcholine increase. Furthermore, although Alpha-GPC doesn't necessarily increase the amount of acetylcholine that is produced in all parts of the brain, it does help to maintain existing acetylcholine levels during times of increased stress. It is theorized that this is because Alpha-GPC seems to increase the amount of protein in the transporter used to spread acetylcholine throughout the brain, making it stronger and more efficient at transporting the chemical between regions.

Alpha-GPC can also increase the amount of potassium-invoked activity within the brain; this means that it helps foster any sort of chemical release that is spurred by potassium. Some examples of potassium-invoked activity include the release of calcium in the hippocampus and the release of dopamine from neurons, especially in the frontal cortex and cerebellum. In a study conducted on rats, Alpha-GPC injections resulted in higher dopamine levels in both areas. Alpha-GPC has also been shown to improve and streamline the transportation of dopamine throughout the brain. The same study also found that rats, when exposed to Alpha-GPC, had increased amounts of serotonin in the same area. Alpha-GPC has also been known to promote GABA release; GABA is a critical neurotransmitter that promotes relaxation and sleep.

Unlike other choline supplements, Alpha-GPC is easily distributed both to the brain and throughout the body. The glycerophosphate that comprises the rest of Alpha-GPC's make-up also helps protect and rejuvenate cell membranes. Alpha-GPC has proved to be effective in slowing the onset and reducing the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease; it's prescribed to Alzheimer's patients in Europe, but in the US it's largely used as a memory enhancement supplement. The FDA has classified Alpha-GPC as "generally regarded as safe", and it is available over the counter.

How to Make Your Own Beats: A Beginner's Guide to Crafting Great Rap & Hip-Hop Tracks

Making your own beats for the first time can be confusing and frustrating, but it's necessary if you have dreams of producing your own music. After all, the beat drives the song, the flow, and everything about the experience; once you have a good beat as a foundation, you can take it anywhere. On the flip side, a choppy, mediocre beat can make the best lyrics in the world sound like cheesy limericks. We love rap, and we want to hear more of it, so we've created this helpful beginner's guide to give you the tools to overcome some of the early hurdles producers face as they learn what it takes to become the GOAT. We hope you'll use it to create the next best beat we've ever heard!

Study the Fundamentals. Rock, classical, pop, and hip-hop beats all have unique structural rules. A good hip-hop beat usually includes a clap or snare every two bars, with accented kicks. Know the terms like hats, hi-hats, claps, and kicks. Know the difference between a closed hi-hat, which are usually used for 16th notes, and an open hat, used for the offbeat. Listen to producer cuts of your favorite songs, without the lyrics and samples that distract from the beat itself. Knowing the terms will let you take the beat in your head and turn it into a real, usable beat.

Invest in the Right Equipment. You can have a great beat planned in your head, but without good equipment, no one will ever get to hear it. You'll want to choose a beat making software that's easy-to-use, with features that actually provide useful solutions to creative obstacles, and offers high-quality drum kits, synthesizers, and soundboards. You may not think, as a beginner, that you need a software with a ton of bells and whistles - until you realize that a bell or a whistle will take your beat to the next level, and that cheap software you chose puts an end to your creative flow. We recommend **Dr. Drum Beat Making Software** for beginners and professionals alike. Don't skimp when it comes to your foundations!

Get Comfortable Using Loops. A repetitive loop is generally a must for a hip hop or rap beat; you can create your own loops or use samples from existing audio. It can sometimes be easier for a beginner to rely on existing audio, but that doesn't mean you're limited to popular songs.

MF Doom is a great example of a producer who used a range of surprising, obscure, and avant-garde loops to make some of the most memorable rap songs of all time; listen to *Operation: Doomsday* and make note of the loops he uses to get inspiration. But, it's not enough just to find a killer loop: it needs to fit the track you're building. Consider what sort of loop will reflect the vibe: a love song might need something slow and sentimental, whereas a hype track will benefit from something loud and fast. Think of the difference between Ye's "Bound 2" and Ice-T's "Midnight". Whatever your track is going to express should be mirrored in what you choose as a loop. Try to avoid overly complex loops, as the focus of a beat should be to highlight the rapper, not take the attention away from them. The loop for your chorus should be different from the rest of the song, so look for something simple and catchy that will get stuck in people's brains and make your beat unforgettable.

Create a Killer Bass Line. You want a bass line that will flow naturally with your beat; your bass line needs to complement your loops without taking away from them. You also want to make sure your bass line isn't just there for show and actually adds to the efficacy of your beat. You're not trying to be Primus, but a beat without bass isn't a beat at all. It's a bit of a tightrope walk, but you'll want to make it one of the first things you master. Nas and Kendrick Lamar mastered the art of bass lines, and it's worked out pretty well for them!

Experiment with Effects and Sound Levels. There's so many intricacies when it comes to fine-tuning a beat: you can adjust the reverb on your drum kit to make your snares and claps sound different, or amp up the kick by boosting the bass. You don't want to overdo it and make your beat too complex for anyone to listen to or work with, but you do want variety and depth in your sound. Master your track, adjusting the beat and melody to achieve a balance. Your kick and snare sounds should be louder than your hi-hats. Your beat should be recognizable, but it should still support the melody rather than taking over the whole song.

Make Mistakes On Purpose. Try everything at first, even if you're pretty sure it's the wrong thing to try. Think of all the mistakes that J Dilla or El-P had to make over the course of their careers just to get a single hit - plan to make twice as many mistakes as they did, and you might just find yourself making something twice as good. It might seem like a waste of time to apply

an effect that you *know* won't work, but you can always go back and fix it - and you never know when remembering what that effect did this one time, in this one instance, might cause a lighting strike of genius in the future. And, sometimes, it's the last thing you think to try that winds up being the thing your beat needs.

Producing your own beats is a lifelong learning process; there's always going to be more to learn, new artists to study, and upgraded technology to play with. But, if you're committed to the art, it's all worth it. For our money, there's no such thing as too many great producers, and we can't wait to hear what you come up with.

Mount Washington: LA's Hidden Urban Oasis

If there's something about L.A. that people—even Angelenos—tend to overlook, it's that before there were movie stars in Hollywood, hippies in Topanga Canyon, and hipsters in Silver Lake, people were drawn to the land itself. Nowhere in modern-day L.A. is a better reminder of Southern California's marriage of mountains and sea than Mount Washington: a tight-knit, family-friendly neighborhood that is, magically, both a short drive and worlds away from the bougie clichés of Sunset Boulevard and the tourist traps of Burbank. Here, amid winding streets and homes nestled into rugged slopes, residents savor breathtaking views of the city below and the distant, shimmering Pacific, embracing a lifestyle where community and nature coalesce to create a tranquil retreat from urban chaos.

A Glimpse into History

In 1909, real estate mogul Robert Marsh established the Mount Washington Hotel atop a peak in the San Rafael Hills. The hotel, complete with a funicular train (the remnants of which can still be seen on Marmion Way), was built to serve the nearby South Pasadena resorts. Although the hotel eventually faded, the surrounding neighborhood flourished. Today, Mount Washington spans about two miles in Northeast L.A. and is home to roughly 17,000 residents. It remains an urban getaway—close enough for a downtown commute but secluded enough to feel like an entirely different world.

Cost of Living

Mount Washington offers an eclectic mix of housing options, reflecting its diverse architectural heritage. Here's what you can expect:

- **Median Home Value:** Approximately \$730,000
- **Average Rent:** Just under \$2,000 per month

From canyon-side Victorian mansions to mid-century modern homes on stilts and charming Craftsman cottages, the neighborhood is a canvas for architectural creativity. Esteemed architects like John Lautner, Gregory Ain, and Richard Neutra have left their mark here, and many

properties boast some of the best views in L.A.—with the Pacific Ocean and stunning sunsets often in sight.

Commuting in and Around Mount Washington

Mount Washington is strategically located beside Cypress Park, south of Eagle Rock, and west of Highland Park. This positioning provides several commuting advantages:

- **Proximity to Major Highways:** The Arroyo Seco Parkway connects you to Burbank and Downtown L.A. in as little as 20 minutes by car or about an hour on public transit.
- **Public Transportation:** Access is easy via Metro train lines and bus routes, with established bike paths for those who prefer cycling.
- **Traffic Benefits:** Its steep, twisting streets naturally divert through-traffic, making it a quieter, more relaxed area despite its central location.

Food and Drink

While Mount Washington may not boast a plethora of upscale dining options, its charm lies in its unpretentious, local flavor:

- **Local Favorites:** Enjoy authentic Mexican dishes at La Abeja, classic American fare at Melody Bar and Grill, or Filipino cuisine at Tagalog Takeover.
- **Convenience:** Most homes are within a ten-minute reach of natural food stores or even a favorite taco truck.
- **Neighborhood Vibe:** With no chains or fast-casual franchises dominating the scene, residents enjoy a unique culinary experience reflective of the area's artistic and community-driven spirit.

Things to Do in Mount Washington

Don't let the absence of a bustling nightlife fool you—Mount Washington is rich in culture and history:

- **Southwest Museum of the American Indian:** A premier institution for preserving and celebrating indigenous art and culture.

- **El Alisal:** The early 20th-century Craftsman home of Charles Lummis, now a registered historical landmark and museum showcasing gorgeous stonework and expansive grounds.
- **Self-Realization Fellowship:** Explore the lush gardens and tranquil grounds of the world headquarters, located on the former site of the Mount Washington Hotel.
- **Local Art Scene:** Stroll through nearby galleries and discover works by local artists who call Mount Washington home.

Mount Washington offers a rare blend of urban convenience and rural charm—a neighborhood where history, art, and community converge. It’s an urban escape that reminds you of the natural beauty and pioneering spirit that first attracted people to Southern California. Whether you're looking to enjoy scenic views, explore rich cultural landmarks, or simply live in a tight-knit community with easy access to downtown L.A., Mount Washington stands as a testament to the diverse and ever-evolving spirit of Los Angeles.

Embrace the unique vibe of Mount Washington and discover an L.A. that goes beyond the glitz and glamour.

Figs: A Brief History

The fig surplus was a result of all men and many children being turned into fig trees. There were fig trees everywhere. No matter the climate, the fig trees survived. Fig trees grew in dark corners where men had gone to smoke cigarettes or urinate, no sunlight to speak of, and no one knowing a fig tree was there until the figs overwhelmed the alley and spilled onto the sidewalk. They grew out of mattresses, roots mixed up in bed-springs. Some women kept sleeping next to the fig trees, woke up with leaves in their hair and fig juice on their backs and sometimes stuck in a swarm of fig wasps.

The date industry fell apart. The dildo industry boomed. Women with male-coded bodies were hounded for their anatomy. This was harrowing for some, delightful for others. Either way it was better than being a man in any sort of body, which meant you were a fig tree. People who were neither women nor men, or sometimes men and sometimes women, or simultaneously women and men, or anything in between, remained people.

Children of all genders succumbed to transformation. It was impossible to know when or why or whether a child would turn into a fig tree. Võ Diệu Hiền came home one day to find her daughter sprouting sweet flowers from her neck, while the same-age boy next door played badminton by himself in the yard. Adi Evavich's son was eight days old and about to be circumcised. The *mohel* had her shears to his foreskin when he erupted into wood and fig. Not knowing what to do, the *mohel* snipped off the tip of a branch. Amy Sawyer, of Deadhorse, Alaska, gave birth to a bonsai-sized fig tree. It came out trunk first. No one could tell if that was breach or not. After some years, the likelihood that the child you were babysitting or strolling down the street would suddenly take root and burst blossoms outward went down, but it never stopped entirely.

Dr. Shakuntala Mahanti presented a paper at the International Conference on Fig Tree Transformation in Nairobi, wherein she posited that the quality of the fruit could be linked to the quality of human who was tree'd. The paper was universally panned for its lack of evidence, since some people defended men who hit them while others vilified men who hadn't texted them back. And it was impossible to get any mother to admit her child was anything but Christ-like. More papers at more conferences were similarly useless, as children continued to turn into fig

trees without warning. It was only when people accepted this as their new reality that they could begin the real work of finding some use for all the figs.

The trees produced figs daily. Ripe figs fell throughout the night and new ones would be budding by morning. The streets were messy with figs. When it rained, the fig pulp turned to mud and ran into the gutters, clogging the sewers, stink rising like heat from the ground.

And then there were the wasps. The fig trees were full of wasps.

Figs are not fruits. They are inverted flowers, blooming internally, pollen protected from wind and bees. Fig wasps are born in the inedible male figs, which are shaped precisely to harbor wasp eggs. The larva mate within the fig, brothers fertilizing sisters. The blind, wingless males devote their lives to digging a tunnel through which the female wasps can escape, bearing pollen and eggs. The females fly to new figs and tunnel into the center, a process which costs them their antennae and wings. They lay their eggs, die, and are absorbed back into the fig. Many female fig wasps wind up tunneling into the female fig – the edible ones – accidentally, where there is no room for them to lay their eggs. They starve to death, alone and full of eggs that will never hatch, but they've done what the fig tree needs them to do, which is to spread pollen so the figs can ripen.

Everyone learned a lot about fig trees in the beginning, but no one could figure out how the fig trees and the fig wasps were so productive in so many inhospitable climates. What they knew was that the best way to get rid of the figs was to get rid of the fig wasps. They tried spider mites, but after some experimentation it was widely agreed that hordes of spider mites were a worse thing to have than landscapes of fig trees. A similar conclusion was drawn for carpenter worms, darkling ground beetles, dried fruit beetles, earwigs, freeman sap beetles, confused sap beetles, navel orangeworms and fig tree borers. Too many bugs was clearly worse than too much fruit.

Women in the American Midwest fed figs to livestock. They chose only the best figs to feed to cattle, because the endless supply meant they could afford to be choosy. They threw the worst figs into trucks and deposited them in the Nevada desert. Figs replaced corn as the livestock feed of choice, but no one knew what to do with all the leftover corn, so that went to the desert, too.

Pigs eat everything, including figs. Chickens tolerate figs. Cows famously have four stomachs, which work like a fermentation tank for the optimal digestion of grass and grass-like

plants. Eating too much of anything but grass and grass-like plants makes cows sick. But cows had been eating corn, a grain, not a grass, for years with the help of antibiotics, so they started eating figs, too. The cow stomachs fermented the figs, leaving the cows gassier than ever.

The use of livestock as fig disposal systems meant the livestock population remained steady. But with only a few billion people to feed, and nearly whole countries of people who didn't eat meat, the demand for dead animals dropped precipitously. Women who lost their children to transformation were particularly sensitive to the act of taking calves from their mothers to slaughter, so the world faced a concurrent surplus of living veal and scarcity of cow's milk. This didn't affect women in places where milk was not a staple ingredient, but Baskin Robbins went out of business.

The empty storefronts were sold to entrepreneurial women who sold fig-based beauty products or child transformation insurance or dildos. In Belarus, the sole Baskin Robbins storefront was bought by a company that would hand-carve a lovers' face into their fig tree. The business was a success and an American corporation bought it out within a month. Copycat businesses popped up, offering laser-cut portraits that were more realistic and cheaper, but plenty of women still paid the premium to have an artist come in and tenderly chip away at the wood that had been their men.

The desert fig pile was a bad idea. The smell went for miles and wild animals got fat and sick eating the figs and corn. Pretty much everyone was getting sick of figs. Nabisco stopped making Fig Newtons and Newman's Own stopped making Fig Newmans. The figs were useless but wouldn't stop coming. It became unmanageable, a nightmare, figs in the bathtub, figs attracting rats and raccoons, figs making the grass slippery, figs making fingers sticky, fiber-filled figs making the cows fart more, figs in the desert rotting, piri piri figs, fig po' boys, fig l'orange, fig-flavored corn chips, fig nuggets, fig etouffée, figs in a blanket, three-fig dip, fig a la vodka, general Tso's figs, fig onion soup, figs eternal and emotionless, figs demanding nothing but space, figs that couldn't be blamed for existing, figs that couldn't be blamed for anything.

But, as doctors were quick to point out, figs helped reduce the risk of breast cancer. And figs were high in fiber. Figs were also bountiful sources of magnesium, manganese, calcium, copper, potassium, vitamin K and vitamin B6. Dried figs had even more calcium than fresh figs, as much calcium as an egg. Figs fought free radicals. Though notorious for speeding up tooth

decay, figs were not the worst thing to have a surplus of, especially once fig seed oil became a viable fuel source.

Though not traditionally economical, the overwhelming availability of fig seeds turned a cottage industry into normal practice worldwide. Though car travel was less popular since the streets were so often mired in fig guts, it only spurred the invention of tires specifically designed for traction on fruit. Furthermore, jobs like “fig sweeper” and “fig-plow operator” paid well and were satisfying because they truly benefited the community. Everyone cheered and smiled and waved when the fig plow rolled down the block. The people had begun to think that the figs were not really their enemy, but this routine mechanical victory over the fruit still struck them as a triumph.

Beyond clearing the streets and pressing seeds for oil, the humans could only weave more baskets from more branches to hold more figs, and to rejoice in the endless surplus. They learned to wade daintily through ankle-deep figs, purple-dyed feet a new trend that everyone could flaunt. There could be no war, since the only war that mattered had been won by the fig trees. Everything that had once been said about human nature was no longer true. Human nature, it seemed, was defined by the world in which humans lived, and not the other way around. The fig trees brought this knowledge, and the people were grateful for it. The fig trees meant no harm.

How fragrant was the world of figs. How wonderful was the economy of fruit. What a joy to receive the new issue of *Cooking Light*, now printed on fig bark paper, now featuring recipes for fun ways to prepare figs for all your holidays. The people told stories that made it seem like the figs had always been there, that this was the way it was supposed to be. The stories were as beautiful as any story written before, and the figs were more beautiful than any human: radiant in their relentlessness, surviving in splendor and so, so delicious.

Excerpt from Four Dead Animals: An Ethnography of Roadkill in the Age of the Anthropocene

Raccoon

Procyon lotor

Columbus, Ohio

I suspected that if I were to touch the body, it would still be warm. The blood around it was wet and red. The dog wanted to investigate the corpse with her nose, but I would not let her even though I understood her desire. I, myself, stood there investigating it with my eyes. Its body was so broad, the fur pristine. Its face had caved in very neatly.

My sister in Detroit recently found a baby raccoon, ostensibly abandoned, and tried to keep it alive—this was, according to the internet, the wrong thing to do. She should have thrown a blanket at it and left it alone. It died, but if it hadn't died she might have been able to make a pet out of it. It's illegal in some states to keep domesticated raccoons, but they're very cute. They look like old-timey bank robbers. Another cute bandit-faced animal is the black-footed ferret, which was thought to be extinct from 1979 to 1981. The black-footed ferret's decline is linked to declining prairie dog populations—prairie dogs are the black-footed ferret's favorite food. Prairie dogs, like beavers, are a keystone species, and they're regularly targeted as pests by farmers.

North American raccoons are not at all endangered. In my suburban New York hometown, you could watch raccoons slide up out of the gutters every night. Raccoons, like pigeons and rats, have adapted swimmingly to dense human populations. In one study, raccoons were shown to avoid heavily-trafficked intersections in Toronto. City raccoons, moreso than their country cousins, are adept at picking locks and getting into "raccoon-proof" trash cans. They've solved the Aesop test, dropping stones into a container to get water levels to rise – though some raccoons solve the puzzle by tipping over the container instead of dropping stones. Pretty cute.

The raccoon gets its English name from the Powhatan word *aroughcun*: “animal that scratches with its hands.” In Germany, it’s known as *waschbär*: “washing bear.” People think that raccoons are washing their food when they splash their paws in water, but they are actually increasing the sensitivity of the nerve endings in their paws. About two-thirds of the raccoon’s sensory perceptions come from touch, and they can identify objects even before they touch them using whiskers on their paws. This is, to me, an unimaginable way to be alive.

The *Joy of Cooking* recipe for preparing raccoon: skin, clean, and soak in salt water overnight; scrape off all fat, inside and out; blanch, 45 minutes; add 2 tblspn baking soda and continue to cook uncovered 5 min; drain and wash in warm water; put in cold water and bring to a boil; reduce heat and simmer 15 minutes; preheat oven 350; stuff raccoon with bread dressing (recipe also included); bake covered ~45 min; uncover and bake another 15 minutes. Rebecca the raccoon was one of Calvin Coolidge’s White House menagerie, having saved herself from being served as Thanksgiving dinner by being cute and pet-like.

Hunting raccoons for fur was, at one time, a profitable enterprise. In the mid-30’s, raccoon populations plummeted from overhunting. By the sixties, two million raccoons were harvested during hunting season. In the seventies, that number shot up to five million. In 1982, a pelt was worth \$20, and by the late eighties, the raccoon was “identified as the most important wild furbearer in North America in terms of revenue”. The Asiatic raccoon, also known as the Raccoon dog, is neither raccoon nor dog, but it is more related to dogs as part of the *Canidae* family. This put it at the center of a 2014 dispute over whether its fur should be marketed as “Asiatic raccoon fur” or “Raccoon dog fur”. Americans are so against the idea of harming dogs and cats that it’s illegal to trade or import their fur in the United States; using the word “dog” in the description of the fur would be detrimental to its commercial viability. The FTC ultimately decided that the fur could be marketed as “Asiatic raccoon fur” because “the animal is not a ‘dog’ as consumers understand that term,” adding that “the animal is no more closely related to domestic dogs than are coyotes and jackals.” Coyote fur is what they use to make Canada Goose jackets.

I have feelings about animal rights; I have feelings about animals’ worth. It feels wrong, to me, to say that any sentient being experiences life more fully, more vibrantly, more

significantly, than any other. It feels wrong to say that humans are more worthy than nonhumans of this earth. Other people feel differently. I'm not alone, but neither are they. None of us are. Some people and populations are in danger, but humans are not endangered.

In the United States, about 201 people die from direct contact with animals each year, mostly caused by cattle, bee/wasp stings, and dog bites; another 189 humans die in animal-related car crashes.

Rocket Raccoon, of the *Guardians of the Galaxy* franchise, is a wise-cracking but deeply troubled victim of laboratory testing – his “real” name is 89P13. He is voiced by human heartthrob Bradley Cooper and modelled after raccoon heartthrob Oreo. In the films, Rocket does not know what a raccoon is and does not know that he is one. Rocket's main contributions to the Guardians of the Galaxy are his marksmanship, knowledge of military tactics, and affinity for high-grade weaponry. He is painted as a self-destructive but good-hearted nonhuman person, his flaws rooted in the inhumane treatment he received as an experimental subject.

In real life, raccoons make poor laboratory animals. In the early 20th century, certain intelligence tests indicated that raccoons had intelligence levels similar to apes. At least one experiment showed that raccoons were able to retain information after being distracted, a not-inconsiderable sign of intelligence. This specific experiment, led by Walter Hunter, sparked a debate about whether or not animals had “minds”, a trait defined by the ability to “hold mental images and ideas in their heads.” Behaviorists like John Watson argued that animals cannot be said to have “minds”; they are just “stimulus-response machines”. We know, now, that that's basically not true. Dogs know when they're being treated unfairly; rats will make personal sacrifices to save other rats; corvids punish in-group thieves; aquarium fish have fun playing with bubble streams; cleaner wrasse outperform human children in certain cognitive tests; Egyptian fruit bats have complex and lifelong social bonds; pigeons gamble; flatworms produce endorphins.

Despite the interest in their intelligence and problem-solving skills, raccoons are too wily to be easily contained, chewing through cages and escaping into lab ventilation systems. Fantasies of breeding docile, domesticated raccoons went unrealized. In most fields, rats and mice are the laboratory subject of choice; in 2001, eighty million mice and rats were used as experimental subjects. Overall, an estimated twelve to twenty-seven million vertebrate animals

(chiefly mice, rats, guinea pigs, rabbits, cats, dogs, primates, pigs, ferrets, and goats) are used annually in research in the United States. Rats, mice, birds, and fish – 95% of the animals used in testing – are not covered under the United States' Animal Welfare Act. The USDA reported that 71,370 animals used in testing in 2016 suffered pain without anesthesia. That figure does *not* include rats, mice, birds, or fish. I take two daily medications and several vitamins and supplements, all of which have been tested on animals.

Many months after seeing the dead raccoon, having forgotten about it, I was walking the dog near where its corpse had been and stepped into something very mushy that was not mud. The dog was very excited to pick the rotten thing up by its dried-out, bile-brown paw. I yelled until she dropped it. It was probably not the same raccoon, but it might have been; the corpse might have frozen and been preserved over winter, delaying its decomposition. I walked the dog recently and the decomposed body was still there, its one paw still defiantly identifiable. On a website directory for municipal services for the city of Columbus, I am told that:

The Division of Refuse Collection collects dead animals in the public right-of-way.

One person, using a specialized pick-up truck, provides this service.

For collection of a dead animal on a city of Columbus street or sidewalk, call [redacted].

Dead animals cannot be collected from within your house, basement or garage, or anywhere on your property. Please contact a private animal control company for animal removal from private property.

Veterinarians and some local funeral homes will accept dead animals.

You may arrange to drop-off a dead animal by calling the Capital Area humane Society.

For the collection of dead animals on county roads or highways, contact the Franklin County Department of Highway Maintenance.