
The Mind of a Fish

ANDREW BERTAINA

SOMETIMES I am jealous of the silver-backed shad swimming beneath the glittering rain. Jealous of the shad who darts between the maze of beech roots in the park near home. A silver-backed fish, in its mossy meandering upstream, does not pause, even for food. No, the fish, in its dream of spawning—slips over rocks and between quiet pools, pursues not bottle-nose flies, nor water striders, is undeterred by anything in its watery path.

Unlike the fish, who has achieved quiet purpose, I wander alone through a labyrinth of city streets, distracted by every envelope of artificial light, by acres of power lines, and the blued space between trees. I lift my phone repetitious as an automaton, reading and reading, sending words to flit round the city. All the while, I pursue the question of what I am to do next as doggedly as the fish once chased the slight wing beats of a fly.

The fish never asks itself if it is unhappy, but is happiness untethered—skimming through water, buggy eyes wide, taking in igneous, muddy bits of sand, and the flash of quartz, all treasures born by water traveling through Piedmont rock. The fish swims without knowing or asking whether the unexamined life is not worth living or if the winter will be long and cold.

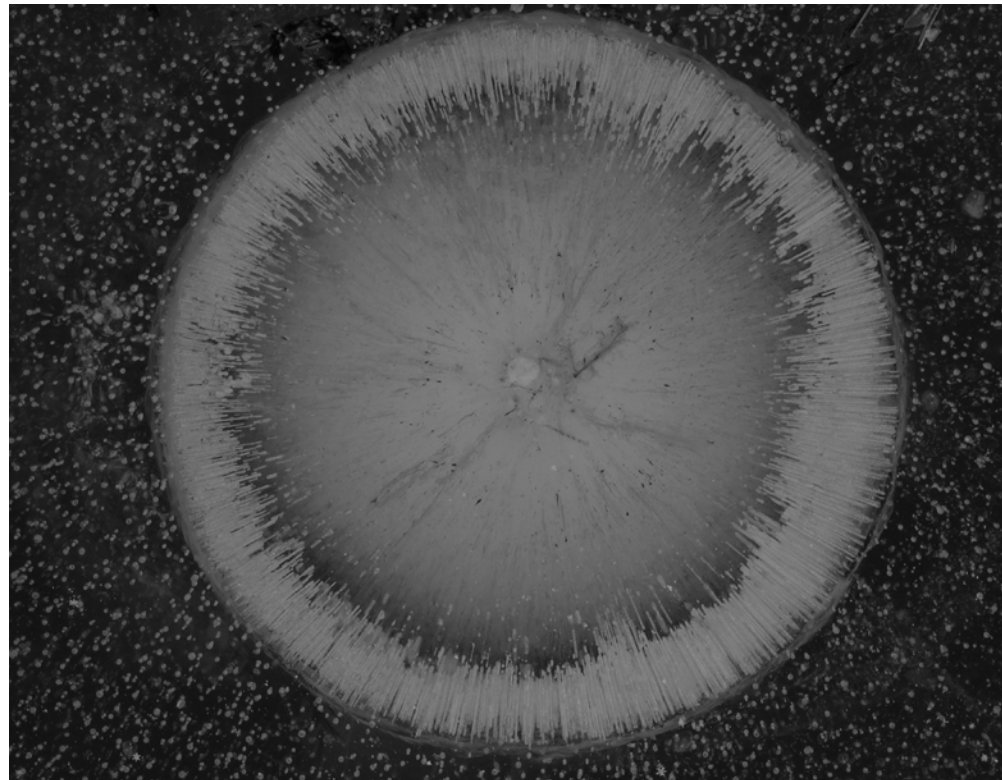
From the bridge in Rock Creek, where we take our daily walks, my children and I watch flecks of light jitterbugging on water. We rest knobby elbows on fence beams, peering down into Rock Creek in hopes of spotting those single-minded fish. We drop an autumn-scored leaf from

the bridge, veins of deep purple, flecks of red. The leaf floats down on a gentle draft of unseen wind, twirling and twirling on its merry way.

Who am I? What am I to do? I mean to ask the children these questions—children, who are always so ripe with strange answers. But they are busy retrieving barbed sticks, downed bits of oak, soiled acorns, reedy branches, and scruffy pieces of bark. The children are like the fish—in flow—desperate to throw everything into the water, as I once was, many watery decades ago.

Andrew Bertaina's short story collection One Person Away From You won the 2020 Moon City Press Fiction Award. His work has appeared in The Threepenny Review, The Normal School, Open Bar at Tin House, and The Best American Poetry. His work is available at andrewbertaina.com.

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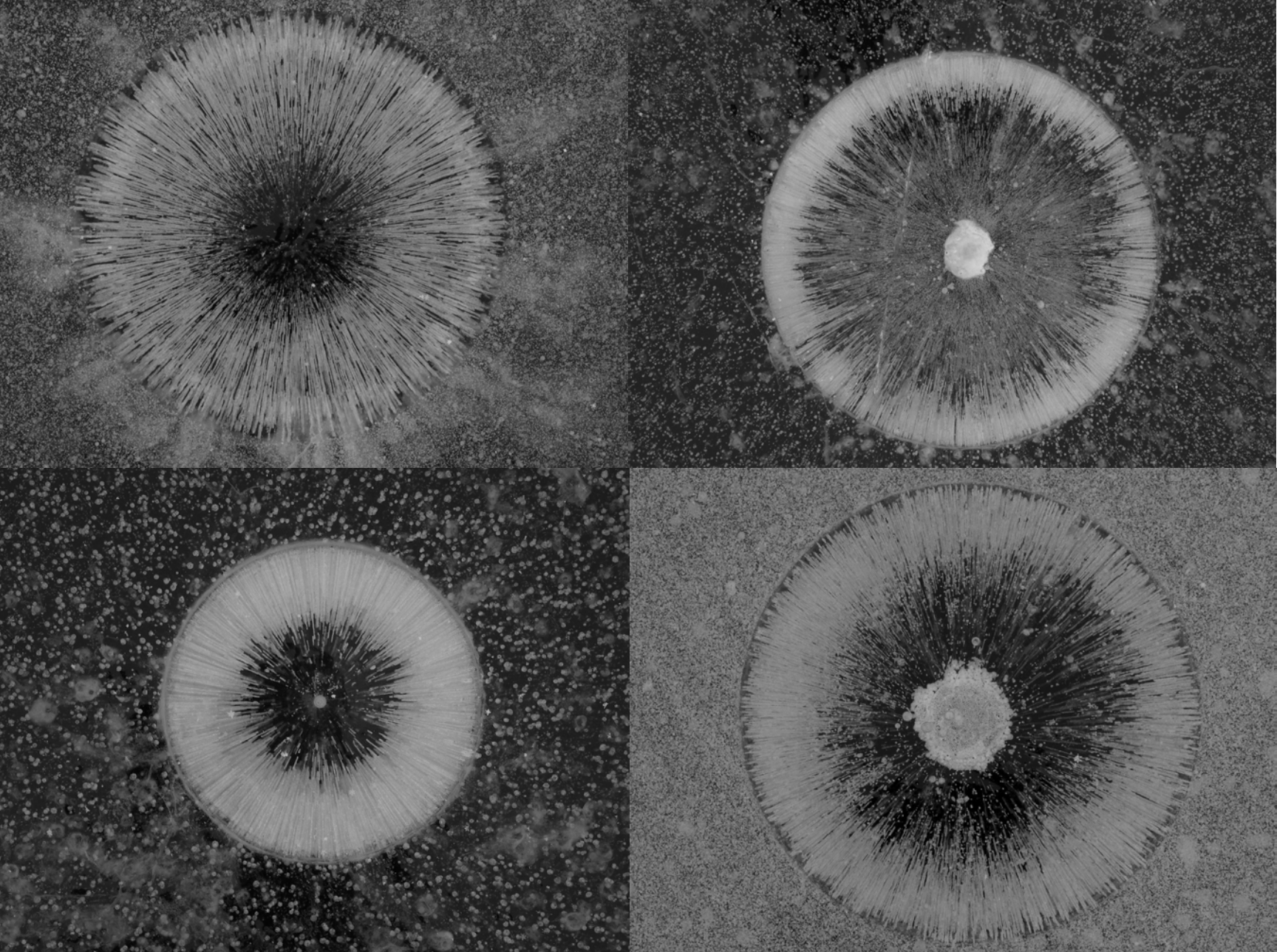


Compost Offerings

HARRISON HILL

THE ELEVATED cardboard box sits discreetly at the side of my couch. It draws no attention to itself, emitting little more than a whiff of woody vitality. And yet this box—my compost—is nonetheless a site of great activity. In my apartment, nowhere is busier, nowhere more exciting.

I remove the white fabric cover and thrust a hand into the ongoing decomposition. The peat is grainy black, crumbly but damp, studded with the colorful remains of a dozen meals past: orange rinds, turnip tops, apple peels. Several inches down, near the reinforced base,



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my fingers register pockets of warmth. They thrill me, these thermal indicators that *it's working*, that the mites and motes are actively devouring their way through my table scraps. I picture these microscopic agents as little Pac-men and -women, their pulses racing as they nibble at my eggshells. Silently I cheer them on. *Nice work, everybody. Nice work.*

I launched the compost in May 2020, after organic waste pickup halted in New York City, where I live. I got the idea from a *New York Times* article about an

apartment-friendly Japanese method that involves no worms or other smelly unpleasanties. You simply fill a cardboard box with moistened coco peat and biochar, and let the microbes take it from there.

I was, at first, suspicious of the technique's simplicity. In my Virginia youth, composting was a nasty, buggy, foul affair; it belonged outdoors, behind the chicken coop, not in the living room. But my indoor compost has worked astonishingly well. The project is now two years old, and though I've dumped

many hundreds of husks, peels, heels, and shavings into the box's musky maw, it seems hardly to have grown any fuller.

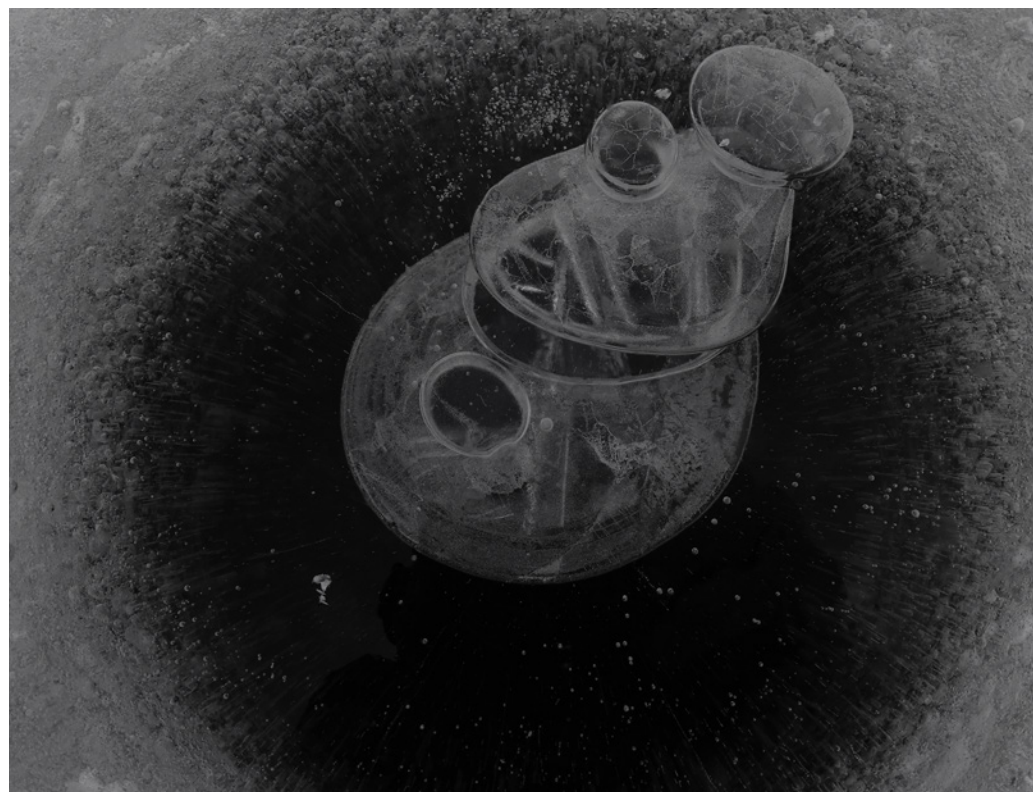
In the morning, I walk to my compost like a pilgrim approaching a shrine. My offerings are humble—espresso grounds, oatmeal leftovers—but I am confident they will be appreciated. My cat paws to my side as I lift the cover; she knows what is coming and loves to watch. Together, we scan the black mass, assessing its health. I give it a preparatory fluff, mixing the drier periphery into the moist center.

And then it happens: I dump my scraps. At first I mix them with a spoon. Then, when I've achieved a certain degree of integration, I dive in both hands, lifting and fluffing this animate, edible diary. I tear at the peel of a parsnip. I rip at the wedge of a cabbage. I cannot decompose as my microscopic workers do, but I can help them with their labor. *Here, let me mash that almond. Let me snap that stalk. Can I get you a spray of water?*

What pleasure there is in watching food de-manifest itself! Orange peels are my favorite. At first they seem so sturdy. But within a day they begin to soften, literally warming to their surroundings. Within forty-eight hours, they are squishy to the touch; by day four, they have developed a sugar-plum delicacy. Then, by day five (*how?*), they are gone.

Though composting gives me a version of the satisfaction I imagine others take from gardening, the two endeavors are spiritual opposites. My excitement is a kind of photonegative of the food producer's—joy not in the appearance of life but in its evaporation. I am not *growing* celeriac or kale; I am, rather, *un*-growing them. This is anti-alchemy, the exquisite transformation of something into nothing.

I began the experiment as something noble and virtuous. It is, to be clear, both



Ice Hole, any more info?

these things: waste that deteriorates in a landfill emits methane, a harmful greenhouse gas, into the atmosphere. But as these months have gone by, my relationship to the box has shifted. I now see composting not as a chore, but as an activity. It is something to do with my hands, a way to be still with myself when the rest of humankind is in tumult. I suppose you could call it meditation by way of decay. If the world's collapse—its decomposition, as it were—is to be a clamorous riot, I choose a quieter, calmer form of breakdown.

I run my fingers through the earthy remains. I linger under the calming warmth of their weight.

Harrison Hill's writing has appeared in GQ, The Cut, The Guardian, Travel + Leisure, and The American Scholar. His first book will be published by Scribner.

First Colonizers

KRISHNA ANUJAN

TWO HUNDRED and fifty thousand mold spores can fit on the head of a pin. These microscopic fairies stay inert for weeks, hovering in the air around us, waiting for a warm, damp opportunity to strike. To multiply. They inhabit the fuzzy boundaries between physics and biology, life and not-yet-life. Is and is not. As a human living in the Anthropocene, I like to think that I have substantial control over at least some of the life around me. I can build walls. Doors. A roof. I can decide who comes in. But once something is built, the mold spores will inevitably descend.