



## When I Come Back: A Farmer's Literary Meditation on the Samaritan's Call to Neighbor Love

TIFFANY EBERLE KRINER

There's a certain time of year when I begin to be afraid to go back into the barn. It's not the beginning of lambing season—the first lamb births of the season are amazing. The phone rings with a call from the barn, and I drop everything and rush over. I am flush with the miracle—triplets!—and the naming and cuddling and the euphoria. I want to see each and every one, and it's hard to leave for work. But then (God forbid!) a lamb dies, or (God forbid!) a ewe dies, or we don't know whether a lamb or a ewe might die, and then one or more needs bottle-feeding every few hours, and then one might need a vet, and every vet visit costs as much as a third of the profit that we'd make on the sheep itself, which I don't particularly care about, but my not caring about profit is just a teensy bit offensive to my husband who would really like to make a profit sometime, and the offense gets a little magnified when we're really low on sleep, so things get stressful. I begin to get afraid to go back to the barn because of what I might find there—another problem, something we missed that has led to an unforeseen disaster. I would rather just stick to my own work: reading, teaching, students, committees.

*What does it mean to love one's neighbor? What do the parable of the good Samaritan, Albert Camus's *The Plague*, and the experience of tending lambs have to do with the love of neighbor? And what does all this mean in the season of spring and Easter resurrection?*

My friend Ben told me recently that the Old Norse *Hávamál* has a proverb in it from Odin that says, “Livestock die; kinsmen die; and so one dies oneself. But one thing that does not die: the fame of a dead man’s deeds.” I can’t speak about the fame of a dead man’s deeds, but we have definitely found it the case that livestock die. It’s so unfair: if my dog Petey pounces on a grape that fell off the counter, I can dose him with peroxide and he’ll vomit up the poisonous grape whole in ten minutes (yes, this happened a couple of weeks ago, during lambing season, in between lambing crises). He’ll be a little sleepy after vomiting, but unscathed. The sheep, though, might die at any moment, even after significant effort and medical care have been expended. And I begin to be afraid that I’ll find a dead lamb or a dead ewe, and it will have been my fault that they died, for not caring for them well enough. When I hold a lamb up to my heart, will I feel a strong heart beating back and good breath? Or will I hear that ropy breathing that signifies pneumonia from incorrectly angled bottle-feeding? Will I feel a good full stomach? Or will I feel a bloat-full stomach, which can kill? So I want to stop coming back to the barn. I have other things to do.

Likewise, I avoid books that I think will make me even sadder than I am (the word “heartbreaking” in an endorsement on the cover is more or less a guarantee that I will only read the book if I have to for work). So I only read Albert Camus’s *The Plague*<sup>1</sup> because early on in the pandemic, as our college was pivoting online, our “one college, one book” program, Core Book, decided to likewise pivot to something appropriate to the cultural moment. The novel tells the story of a resurgence of bubonic plague in the city of Oran, on the coast of Algeria. Reading it, I encountered difficult moments: as early as page 7 our narrator stumbles over a dead rat, which only leads to more and more gruesome images of piles of dead rats. I felt justified in my avoidance of certain types of internal disruption. But the novel became fascinating almost immediately because of an overwhelming readerly sense of recognition—the descriptions of the town that felt so much like our town, the feeling of exile that a pandemic creates so like the exile we were beginning to feel.

---

*I avoid books that I think will make me even sadder than I am (the word “heartbreaking” in an endorsement on the cover is more or less a guarantee that I will only read the book if I have to for work).*

---

The novel is a classic ensemble piece, in which we see several characters respond to the experience of the plague in Oran from their own vocational locations. There is a doctor, Rieux, whose wife is far away in a sanatorium. There is a not-from-around-here reporter, Rambert, who is in love with a woman back in

<sup>1</sup> Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Laura Marris (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2021); first published as *La Peste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947).

France. There's a sweet minor bureaucrat, Grand, with the most charming amateur literary ambitions—he can't get past the first sentence of his novel. There's an intense, intellectual priest, Father Paneloux, who believes the plague is a visitation of divine wrath but then has to watch a kid die at close range. There's a guy on vacation, Jean Tarrou, who stays, taking notes on it all, and starts a volunteer brigade. There's an officious magistrate who gets stuck in the quarantined camps. There's a suicidal black-market criminal. There's an older man who sits on his balcony spitting at cats. There's a memorable asthmatic fellow who passes the time by moving chickpeas from one container to another and then back again. Each becomes a hypothetical answer to the question "How shall we live in times like these?"

A great deal of the work during lambing is simply being in the barn, checking for impending miracles and disasters without knowing which it will be when you walk in. We just check on the situation, lifting the ewes' tails while they are munching hay. We look to see whether their bags of milk have swollen; to see whether their back ends have turned the color that signifies birth is coming soon; to see whether they have begun to produce the significant liquid that signifies birth is coming *very* soon. The more time you spend, the more you know. We might have thought Spot would give birth in the next day or two, if we'd just begun to come into the barn. But if we come to the barn more often, we remember that her back end tends naturally toward a slightly darker color that could be misleading. Sunny looks like she has quadruplets and will give birth any second—must!—but she doesn't, because that's just the relaxing of her aging body (stop judging—she's not fat) so she's nowhere near close.

When we are at the barn a lot, we notice a little thing that we should shore up just to make sure, something about the barn, or the water setup, or the feed setup. If we don't catch these things and recognize them for what they are, we might go to sleep at night and wake up and find three dead babies. Hence the fear of coming back to the barn. I'd like to simply avoid the whole thing—I have a meeting; a class; a rehearsal; a deadline with that editor. I'd like to just keep on with what I was doing or planning for my job or my other job or my family or whatever.

That fear isn't just a farmer-fear—it happens in social situations too. When a lot is going on, I begin to experience a fear that manifests as hope that no one I run into will share anything significant—especially something significantly bad—with me. If we begin to have a real conversation, there's bound to be another diagnosis, a lingering mental health challenge, a case of burnout so bad that it ends in a hospital. I try to contain the crises around me, contain my obligations in a way that for me is tantamount to failure to be able to love my neighbor as myself. I'm not asking, "Who is the neighbor to whom I am called?" I am asking, "How can I possibly live and love my neighbor with everything else going on?" I am asking those around me—sheep and people alike—to please *not* be my neighbor so I can just do what else needs to be done.

In *The Plague*, fear of the epidemic leads to denial on the part of town leadership; a desire not to paint the picture of what's happening too darkly; a desire to keep everything calm, to avoid setting in place too-harsh governmental responses.

The committee that meets to discuss the cases of the plague settles on an ambiguous narration of it. The doctor says, “I don’t care about the phrasing. Let’s just say that we shouldn’t act as if half the city isn’t at risk of being killed, because then it will be.”<sup>2</sup> The doctor is tempted toward denial by frightening visions of plagues himself but knows what he must do: “clearly recognize what had to be recognized, to chase off the useless shadows at last and take up the appropriate measures.”<sup>3</sup>

We had a lamb this season, Butter, who, a day after birth wasn’t thriving. He had been rejected by his mother because he had mysteriously gotten out of the jug—the bonding place for ewes and lambs. He wasn’t much getting the hang of sucking either. Since we also had a ewe that was prolapsing before giving birth, we decided to call the vet for both of them.

I had to do an online interview for a recruiting initiative at my college and was going to miss the first couple of minutes of the vet session, but I promised to run right over there afterward. I was shocked when Josh texted me that the vet was already gone and that I’d not gotten any of the conversation/learning/questions/answers that I’d expected. About Butter, the receptionist on the phone at the dial-a-vet had said, “Oh, probably a selenium deficiency.” The dial-a-vet service—a team practice of sorts, serving the state-line area—had replaced a personal vet who knew all our farms by heart but died of Covid. When the dial-a-vet arrived, he said, “Oh, the ewe hasn’t given birth yet? Well, I can’t do anything about the prolapse until after. Here’s a selenium shot for the weak lamb.” Then he was gone. He didn’t even touch the ewe or the lamb but told us to keep feeding Butter, maybe even a bit more than we had been.

This was disastrously wrong advice. I think he would have felt the beginnings of bloat if he had just touched the lamb even a little. Just a couple of seasons in, I’d not seen a baby lamb with bloat but I wondered about it, feeling Butter’s little belly, and I’d planned to ask if this might be beginning signs. Might have been too late already, even then, but still. I couldn’t ask, because I wasn’t at the barn; I was at that meeting, and then the vet was gone, and we didn’t recognize the signs.

In *The Plague*, Rambert is a muckraker journalist of sorts, seeking to get the scoop about governmental insufficiencies. He has a fiancée back in France, and when the plague comes, he is stuck in the locked-down city for the duration, separated from his beloved. This separation precipitates a major crisis for Rambert because he thinks that being with the woman he loves is his true calling. He says, “I wasn’t put on this earth to be a reporter. But I might have been put on this earth to live beside a woman.” When the doctor asserts that the plague concerns all of them, Rambert denies it: “But I’m not from here!”<sup>4</sup>

The plague advances, more and more dying. Graves fill up; hygiene is execrable. But Rambert wants to separate himself from it through an assertion of his personal identity and happiness; he “fought to prevent the plague from encircling

<sup>2</sup> *The Plague*, 55.

<sup>3</sup> *The Plague*, 44

<sup>4</sup> *The Plague*, 89–90.

him,” “to deprive the plague of that part of [himself] that [he] would defend to the last.”<sup>5</sup> Not his job. Not his calling. He decides to leave the town illegally and gets to know the black-market smuggler for connections.

Now, readers don't like Rambert, generally speaking. I don't know anyone who really goes for what he's saying about his right to get out, though Rieux, the doctor, claims to support Rambert, at least in theory. But Rambert asserts his right to seek personal happiness as a good with a philosophical fierceness that feels like those pure philosophical views of textbooks: it sounds harsh and selfish. Readers prefer the selfless doctor, Rieux, working his guts out to fight the plague. But I wonder whether more of us might BE Rambert than we think, or whether, to put it plainly, *I* am Rambert. I have to do *my* work; I am needing to be responsible for *my* responsibilities. This other thing? This is YOUR responsibility.

I called the vet back later, when it was undeniably clear that Butter DID have bloat and that things were dire.

The vet said, “Do you have any fjkldsjkfldjklfjkdsfjkdslf?”

Pause.

“Or how about any sjkdlgjiodnfdkfjios?”

I said, “I don't know what those are.”

“Medicines for pain/inflammation.”

“Uh, no.” I was thinking, *How would I have those medicines? Am I a vet? Also, how would those help bloat?*

I said, “I did this thing with baking soda, and we are working to massage the gas, etc.” I didn't know how to ask him what I really wanted: *Tell me how to do field surgery—like a trach, but for bloat.*

He said, “That probably made it worse.”

Here there was a pause.

He said, “Well, you could bring him in.”

He must have known, right, that bloat kills very, very quickly?

“We live forty minutes away from you,” I said.

“Thank you for your help,” I said, and hung up.

Butter died that afternoon, unable to digest the milk we'd given him, the gas inside his body expanding until he couldn't breathe. When there was nothing more to be done, Josh and I stopped the belly massage, and I took him outside for the end of his life here because, I thought, I should like to die under the sky if I can—maybe animals are the same. And I cradled him, head up, both of us crying under the sky, until it was just me crying. He was two and a half days old. He died in my arms.

I walked his little body through the woods, a very small procession of the dead. His body was a pale brown like a not-quite-finished-cooking cajeta caramel, like orchard grass gone dormant for the winter—not cold and dry March grass, but as it feels on an unexpectedly warm, cloudy, fall day. That is, he was pale warm, not pale cold. His face looked almost glazed, a lighter shade than his body. He was

<sup>5</sup> *The Plague*, 148.

beautiful as the prairie itself, and I dug his grave deep in the Hidden Five, a large field where I've begun to plant native perennial flowers. I buried him wrapped in a towel I received as a gift for our wedding more than twenty years ago.

---

*I walked his little body through the woods, a very small procession of the dead. His body was a pale brown like a not-quite-finished-cooking cajeta caramel, like orchard grass gone dormant for the winter—not cold and dry March grass, but as it feels on an unexpectedly warm, cloudy, fall day.*

---

If he'd not gotten out of that jug he'd still be with his mother! And where was I then? Asleep!? Could I not watch one hour?

Or if I'd not been at that meeting, been able to ask the vet my question, would we have recognized the bloat and saved that lamb?

As the plague advances in the novel, Rambert learns that his prioritization of personal happiness, his personal calling to be in love with his fiancée, is insufficient to the situation. The doctor and his companion, Tarrou, suggest that Rambert might be useful to the public health squads, which canvass neighborhoods, transport bodies for burial, and quarantine sick persons. He begins to work with them—at first, just until he finds a way to leave the city, he says.

The text doesn't clearly articulate why he decides to stay, why he gives up the black-market escape: "Rambert said that he'd thought about it some more, that he continued to believe what he believed, but that if he left, he would be ashamed. And that would disrupt his love for the woman he had left behind."<sup>6</sup>

"I always thought," Rambert says, "I was a stranger in this city, and that I had nothing to do with you. But now that I've seen what I've seen, I know that I'm part of this place, whether I want to be or not. These events concern us all."<sup>7</sup>

With that prolapsed ewe, Maggie, whom the vet also saw and dismissed, it was just such a case where staying made all the difference. Two days after Butter died, after work and after worship practice, I'd offered to go do the late-night check in the barn on my way home. Of course, I was so tired, and I was afraid too. Just that morning, we'd gotten another of the dial-a-vet team to come and insert a harness and paddle to try and help her stop straining and pushing her organs out of her body. But that harness's position meant we had to watch Maggie very closely for signs of labor, since it'd be hard to give birth around the harness, and since the strain and fluid of prolapse are more or less identical to the strain and fluid of early labor. I didn't want another Butter situation.

I'd hoped and expected that Maggie would have less difficulty after the harness, less strain, and the vet said it should quiet her—but she wasn't stopping yet.

<sup>6</sup> *The Plague*, 222.

<sup>7</sup> *The Plague*, 222.

The sound of grunting and pushing was the sound of a car trying to start in the cold. It continued all through my checks on the other ewes. How could I leave her in that pain to go to my bed? The vet had said it might take a day to stop the straining, so I had to endure it. He said, "We can't give pain meds because they'd hurt the babies. It could be one day until she gives birth, could be twenty," the vet said, "given how tight that cervix is."

That night in the barn, no other lambs seemed imminently arriving. Or, well, the one ewe who MIGHT be near-ish was already safely in the reconfigured and now safer jug in case she began to give birth overnight. I could have left in good conscience. But I was probably overtired in that way a person who really needs to go to bed DOESN'T in fact go to bed, but instead decides to watch an episode of something on TV. I watched an episode of lamb babies. It was cold in the barn, dusty cobwebs dimly lit by the head lamp, the smell of straw and hay. The ewes, except for Maggie, were mostly settling down for the night. But new lambs jump around just because *LIFELife!* !! And these did, charmingly, even with the pain around them.

I don't know why I stayed in the barn even longer that night. It was not virtue, nor that I was living out my values. I checked the pregnant ewes another time. Rechecked them with the lamp more focused. Checked again, thinking over the minute differences in their anatomical states. Talked on the phone to Josh about this or that, just being there, in the barn. It was time to go home. But poor Maggie! Maybe I could just be with her for another few minutes, breathing with her in her pain. One more check of her harness, with attention to the sound of her incessant straining.

As I knelt down, just then, when I pointed the lamp at her, I saw the pushing forth of a bag of living waters, and the bubble of it bursting, beside the harness and paddle.

I sprang into action, gloved up with the obstetric gloves, removed the harness and paddle and checked. I saw the nose (not the hoof points, so, not good) of the first lamb pushing out, and a tongue that licked at my pinky and sucked—alive (so not as not-good as it could have been!). But the lamb *was* stuck, because that cervix was NOT dilating.

We called the vet out for the ringwomb; Maggie got the first baby out while he was en route (I helped very little, in the end, except to see what was going on, remove the paddle barrier, and call the vet); the vet got the other two out by hand. We could have missed it if I'd done what I considered my bounden duty and gone home. I would have left. I would have believed myself justified in leaving, given the signs and instructions.

But if I hadn't come back that night to check again, if I hadn't stayed longer, Maggie, Magdalena, born two years ago with my mother both in attendance and falling in love ("You can never butcher her! I will pay for the hay!"), would have never been able to lick all over her three newborn lambs—Percy (for Perseverance—the one who got stuck and almost got rejected, but hung in and was licked and loved too), Beauty, and Floppy—and urge them to her breasts.

She would have died, alone, and they would have died too, inside her, never having taken a single breath.

“Livestock die,” says that proverb, however, and Maggie did die, a few days later. Even emergency surgery the next morning didn’t save her from her organs’ endless mysterious exile from herself.

For Camus in *The Plague*, the human bureaucratic situation abstracts us from each other, which leads to exile and separation. But the dying neighbor dies always in particular.

And so it is that the people in the novel who show us a moral way through are those who are able to see their neighbors, recognize the difficulty of coming to terms with them, but are willing to try anyway, staying to extend healing and sympathy, even despite inevitable death.

Another character in *The Plague* who stays rather than leaving is Jean Tarrou, a vacationer who takes up residence at a hotel in the city and becomes a chronicler of the everyday in life. It is “a very particular chronicle, one that seems biased toward insignificance,” as “a historian of what has no history.”<sup>8</sup> He tracks the conversations on the tram, even. Just why Tarrou takes such an interest in the common doings of his neighbors is only revealed with his own history, uncovered near the climax of the novel. It is a response to his past, a history of complicity in the penal system involving the death penalty. A vision of the particularity of a condemned man, “the knot of his tie . . . askew from the angle of his collar,” who “chewed the nails of only one hand, his right,” showed Tarrou the real, connected life of the person seeking justice.<sup>9</sup> And Tarrou is forever changed by that particular man—a red owl, he called him—whom he had seen in his condemned state, in whose death he had been complicit by not seeing him well enough.

Tarrou isn’t a Christian; indeed, he doesn’t even believe in God, though he is interested, he says, in becoming a saint. But his path toward love of one’s neighbor, toward peace between people, is closely observed sympathy—doing what might be done as it comes to him through staying and knowing. This knowledge costs him everything, his hours and days observing his neighbors before the plague and his hours and days serving them once it begins in earnest. His calling, whatever other thing of great promise it had been, disappears. “Others will make history,” he says. What Tarrou does, with his notebooks charting his neighbors and his assistance with the public health crews is learn his “own modesty.” Simply put, he says, “we must, as much as possible, refuse to be on the side of the scourge.” It may be a small life, he says, “You can see that it’s not a great ambition.”<sup>10</sup> But it does smack of that articulation of the vocation of the people of God in Micah: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic 6:8).

<sup>8</sup> *The Plague*, 26.

<sup>9</sup> *The Plague*, 265.

<sup>10</sup> *The Plague*, 272.



That Samaritan in Jesus's story said to the keeper of the inn where he left the beaten-up traveler, "When I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend" (Luke 10:35). I have to keep coming into the barn; I have to come again and again to the neighborhood—at the barn, in the town, in the city, in the job, in the world. Like the Samaritan, I must attend to the agonies of those around me, even when I have so many of my own—agonies, callings, jobs. I probably can't do anything. I'm new here. I'm not a part of this. It's not my job. But it concerns us all. And if I am not there, there's no chance at all of seeing what is really happening and proceeding from that sight to real action. How many neighbors have I left in unrelenting pain in the bleating barn?

---

*I have to keep coming into the barn; I have to come again and again to the neighborhood—at the barn, in the town, in the city, in the job, in the world. Like the Samaritan, I must attend to the agonies of those around me, even when I have so many of my own—agonies, callings, jobs.*

---

I must look at the details. Any detail at all will work; anything is a start. This Transfiguration Sunday—the light from the rose stained-glass window across that man's hands at the church; there he was, right then, beloved of God, suffering, transfigured before me, shadows of invisible birds darting across the stream of light that washed his hands.

Maggie stayed as long as she could. She died with her babies around her; they snuggled up to her pied, dappled coat, thick with winter and red, brown, and white glory (though now much bloodied from the birth—the blood pinked Percy's little, earnestly nursing head). The lambs tucked their bodies around a whimsical wit of a mother that they will never know in her full character. (I suppose none of us know the full whimsical wit of our mothers.) These lambs will know their mother only as sacrificial love in a licking tongue nudging them at the doorway into life.

But Josh knew Magdalena—from her first, miraculous Good Friday birthday survival to her eager, cheeky flourishing young days, when she'd hoof up on us when our backs were turned, to her last, when her straining and giving finally ceased. When Josh found Maggie dead at the midday feeding, he knew what to do, his last service to the dead, for he'd been doing it since her very first day. He lifted her body now as he used to lift her as a growing lamb for a nibble at the leaves of the mulberry tree at the edge of the yard. That is to say, he lifted her up.

Today, morning light filters through the cobwebby barn windows on speckled brown and white lambs that are newborn with joy and alive alive alive alive in the cold straw. The kingdom of God is the most gorgeous, abundant, and alive thing. The God of the kingdom of God is worth loving with heart and soul and mind and strength. My capacities along these lines are disappointingly limited, though.

No wonder I am lying in a ditch; yet no less does the wine and the oil pour over me, half dead, even all the way. Someone lifts me up, and I hear and think, unaccountably, *I will come back.* ⊕

*TIFFANY EBERLE KRINER is associate professor of English at Wheaton College in Illinois. She is a literary scholar with special interests in the intersections among race, place, theology, and literature. When not teaching, she's farming 60 acres of woods and fields with her husband and two children at Root and Sky Farm.*