A Broad Margin
by Pavithra Mehta

To meander is a natural form of movement, uncontrived, unhurried. Rivers and roving butterflies are adept at meandering. And we were too, once upon a time—before we developed a preference for traveling in straight lines, perhaps because of Euclid, who told us a straight line is the shortest distance between two points (for the record he was not entirely right about this.) Regardless of length, a bend in the road will always be revelatory. A straight path seldom holds any surprises. In other words efficiency and epiphany do not typically travel together. This is largely because efficiency deems as irrelevant, so much that is important. For instance, the most efficient way to travel from point A to point B will take into account toll booths, traffic patterns and the time of day. Whether or not the wayside California buckeye tree is currently in bloom will be deemed irrelevant. This is wildly ironic because stumbling upon a California buckeye tree in full bloom can transport you in an instant, but only if you aren’t trying to get somewhere. Efficiency is always trying to get somewhere. This is why it does not gallivant, daydream, linger, or lounge. Unlike Walt Whitman, efficiency has never been known to ‘lean and loafe’ at its ease observing a spear of summer grass— or a California buckeye tree in bloom. No. Efficiency is ever-preoccupied in getting you from here to there. For it to work you must be firmly tethered to space-time, not lifting veils, traversing realms and hitchhiking with eternity (things liable to happen when meandering or being Whitmanesque.)

For most of our lives, whether we know it or not, we are shepherded along by unconscious habits of efficiency and selective attention. This is why passing a California buckeye tree in full bloom without noticing it is shockingly easy to do. Like entirely missing the gorilla-suited personage in the Invisible Gorilla Experiment. While I am eminently okay with not catching sight of people in gorilla suits who wander into my field of vision, I very do not want to miss the sprawling California buckeye tree in late spring, waving its bright five-fingered leaves like so many small hands, covered in fanciful, fragrant wands— each an inflorescence up to eight inches long, studded with scores of tiny white flowers, that burst out of faint pink buds, freckled with delicate gold-tipped anthers, sweetly scented as white grape juice, intriguing from a distance, dazzling up close. Nor do I want to miss it in summer, when it preemptively drops its leaves in anticipation of thirst, a model of voluntary simplicity, or in fall when its large, leathery, pear-shaped pods hang from leafless branches, splitting open to reveal a lacquered seed that bears a striking resemblance to the eye of a buck. And I certainly would be loath to miss it in winter, when its silvery bark is laid bare, and the impressive mind map of its branches rises into view, like a floating labyrinth, a lovely skeleton, a slumbering legend.

Now I am finally undoing the unconscious conventions that control my attention, that push me towards chronic productivity. I am reclaiming my peripheral vision, my wandering soul, my capacity for wonder. I am realizing that what I thought were the footnotes of my life are actually where the fruitful stories are being told. The text in the
middle of the page almost entirely misses the plot.

I am learning to love, like Thoreau, ‘a broad margin to my life.’ Priming myself for the buckeye, and all the beauty that lies just beside-the-point, just around the bend in the road.